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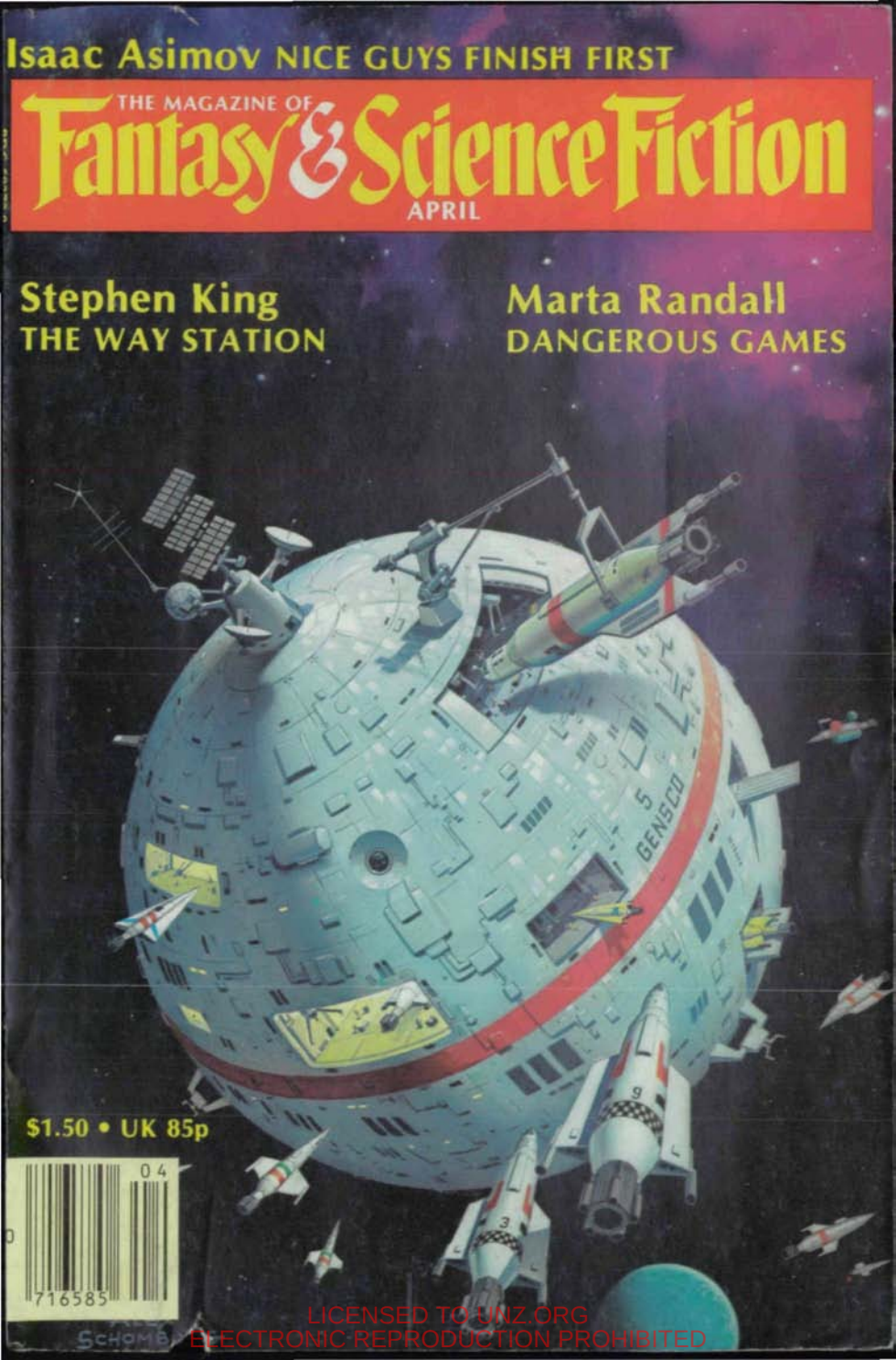

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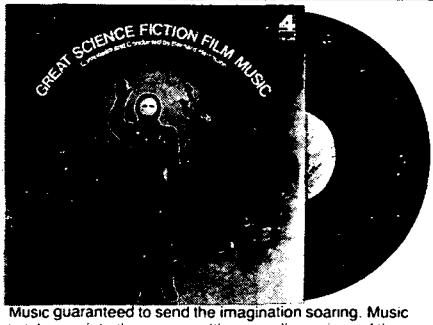

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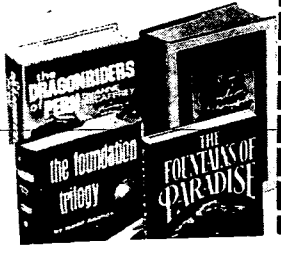

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COVER BY ALEX SCHOMBURG FOR "DANGEROUS GAMES"

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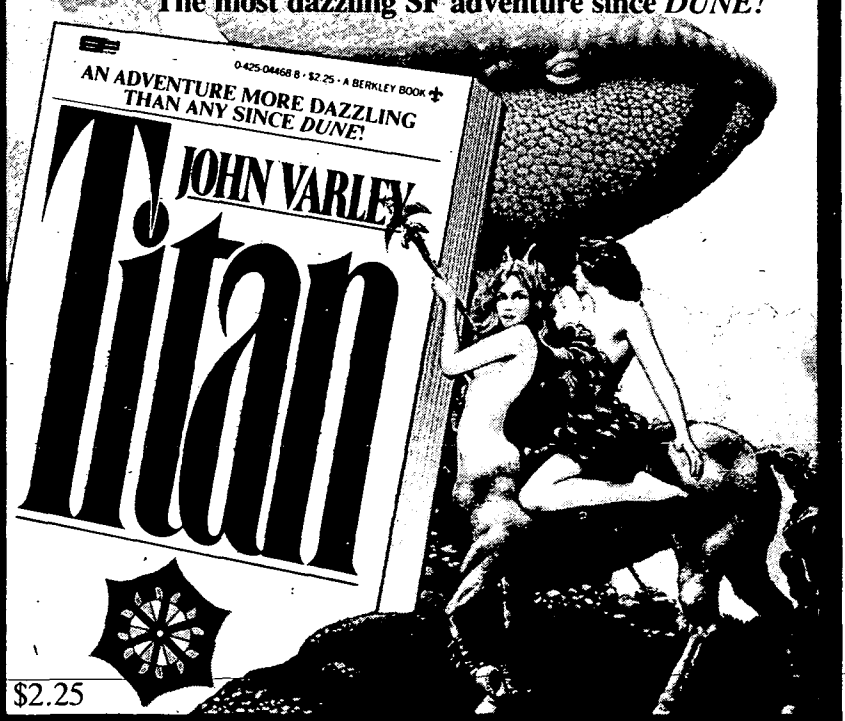

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Marta Randall's new novella is fast-paced, actionful sf in which captain Jes Kennerin lands his crippled tau sloop on an enormous and somewhat mysterious space station that doesn't care much for strangers. Ms. Randall's new novel is HART'S CHILDREN, to be published shortly by Pocket Books.

Dangerous Games

BY

MARTA RANDALL

Will he never come back from
Barnegat,
With thunder in his eyes,
Treading as soft as a tiger cat,
To tell me terrible lies?
Elinor Wylie
The Puritan Ballad

The loosening of the fourth-quadrant stabilizer leads plate was more an annoyance than a crisis, but it could not be fixed in tau. EVA in the dense strangeness of tauspace was dangerous at best, and to be contemplated only in the event of a catastrophe: certainly the breakdown in the leads plate did not so qualify. The backup stabilizer, whining in protest, took most of the strain. Jes slapped temporary patches on the inner hull beneath the loose plate, magnetized the patches, confirmed that they held the plate tightly to the hull and, cursing, instructed the navigational computer to home for the nearest grabstation. And so, two weeks out of Estremadura on a solitary flight to MarketPort to meet his ship, taucaptain Jes Kennerin brought his limping sloop to Priory Main Grab and requested entry.

The Grabmaster himself, squinting with anticipation and delight, appeared on the comscreen and crowed happily when Jes outlined the nature of his problem. Tiny jewels danced beside the master's plump cheeks. He swatted them away from his eyes as he cheerfully announced that his station had no facilities to handle repairs, that the repair docks for the station were closed, and that he would not open them for Jes' use. And when Jes said angry things about backwash spit-stops manned by incompetent ninnies and taking up perfectly good vacuum that was

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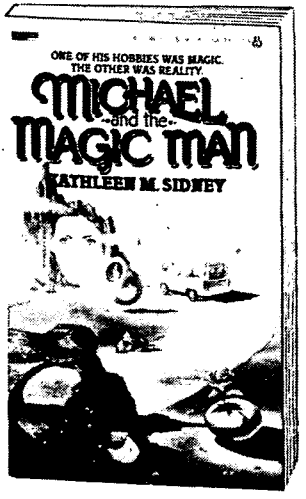

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best used for something of some value, the Grabmaster glared in wry and superficial irritation.

"We," he said importantly, "are a full Alpha-class grabstation, with complete facilities. We are the mainstation for one of the largest sectors in the Federation, I'll have you know. We happen to be nonoperational, my dear, but that doesn't affect our size at all." The 'master smiled suggestively. "Is that simple enough for you to understand?"

Jes put his head in his hands. His fingers tangled in his black hair. "Look," he said, "all I want is space to fix my sloop. Or is your freespace nonfunctional, too?"

"Of course not," the 'master said and leaned forward to do something to the control board. "There you are, my dear, Priory Main Grab warming itself up, and all for your sweet benefit." The Grabmaster grinned through his cloud of jewels and signed off.

Jes glanced at the control bank. The grab coils showed close and clear on the screen. The onboard computer locked with the grabstation net and guided the ship through tau and into the loops of the timecoil.

It was immense, larger than the shipping coils outside MarketPort, and within the heavy bands the tausloop appeared no bigger than a gnat on a winebarrel. The coils glowed sedately, in no great hurry to increase their pull until they affected his ship. Jes watched them impatiently, then tapped his readout screen, requesting whatever information the ship's computer held about Priory Sector.

The general information log in the tausloop was concise but limited. It told him the tau and realspace coordinates for Prior Sector, mentioned the names of the major planets and gave their intra-Sector coordinates, provided a date of colonization and a date of Federation entry, and left it at that.

Jes tapped the screen thoughtfully, then requested a readout of properties and planets currently owned by Parallax Combine, the large, unpleasant company which had, years ago, tried to take over his homeworld and which, according to his family, was trying to do so again. The list was long and he scanned it quickly. Priory did not appear on the list, nor were any of Parallax's properties noted as being in Prior Sector. Jes cleared the screen, annoyed that he'd bothered. He had, two years ago, determined to break with his family, after a series of painful incidents and stormy emotions. He thought he'd managed to divorce himself from their concerns and problems, yet found himself, even now, automatically reflecting their worries, following their constant suggestions, awkwardly longing for their comfort and assistance even as he fought to keep his distance. He took this as a sign of his own weakness, and it was therefore with a fair amount of free-floating hostility that he watched as the coils shimmered and the ship flipped

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through time. He guided the sloop out of the coils and into the stable lights of realspace.

"Good," said the Grabmaster, reappearing on the screen. "Now what are we going to do with you?" The jewels glittered before his eyes, and he batted at them.

Jes glanced from the Grabmaster's beaming face to the forward screens. Priory Main Grab hung in space, an immense, gilded complexity of struts and bars and rings, attached to the coils of the grab by a delicate network of light.

"I don't understand," Jes said. "You do have an Alpha-class grabstation, but...."

"Oh, very simple," the Grabmaster said. The jewels tangled in his carefully curled hair. "Priory Sector is the second largest sector in the Federation, hence this totally preposterous station. It's not needed, of course — Priory is big enough so it doesn't need outside trade, and doesn't want any, thank you. Three separate systems, you know, and tens of inhabitable planets, not counting the Labyrinth, and nobody much counts the Labyrinth anyway." The 'master made an airy gesture, brushing the jewels from his hair. His curls sprang rigidly back into place. The jewels twinkled down to collar level, save for one small blue gem which nestled just above the 'master's left eyebrow. Jes stared at it.

"So, almost no traffic through the grab," the 'master continued, "and I'm simply dying of boredom. Not, of course, that you'd care a flip about that, parties like yourself seldom do. Well, sweetling, just set your drives and head twenty even, four cross. You can sit there nice and tidy while you play with your ... little ship." And the Grabmaster signed off.

Jes shrugged. He'd met stranger folk in the channels of space, and Priory's Grabmaster would be good for some laughs and a couple of beers in the saloons on MarketPort. He ran his fingers over the control panel, entering the coordinates, and slapped the forward thrust slides. As the sloop turned into her new heading, the tattletales for the backup stabilizer went scarlet, a shudder ran through the ship accompanied by the scream of tortured metal, and the entire fourth-quadrant stabilizer leads plate ripped from the hull and sailed majestically, and irretrievably, through the still-shimmering coils of the grab. The plate flared once and disappeared from realspace.

Jes raced to the injured hull. The skin bulged under the missing plate, and stress lines crept along the metal. He layered an emergency seal over the bulge, locked it in place, kicked the defective backup stabilizer, and retreated from the access hold, double-sealing the hatches behind him. The ship needed a repair dock, and soon, for while she had been slightly crippled by the loose leads plate, the stress on her hull was an active emergency. His anger refueled, Jes slapped at the commiter and

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bellowed until the Grabmaster's bland face appeared on the screen again.

The Grabmaster regretted the accident, tendered condolences, and firmly refused to open one of his repair docks, even when Jes threatened a report to the Federation. The man smiled and shrugged and pointed out that opening a dock would do no good whatsoever, as there were no tools in the dock, no replacement leads plates or stabilizers, and that no amount of furious shouting on Jes' part would cause these items to appear. However, the 'master reluctantly thought that Jes might use the docks of Gensco Station, provided that Gensco agreed. Jes collected the tattered remains of his patience and cajoled the Grabmaster into admitting that Gensco Staiton was the headquarters for Priory's main transport agency; that the station, in its continual circuit of Priory Sector, was conveniently close by; that they would be very likely to provide Jes with replacement parts, a repair dock, and a repairs jockey to do the work. For a price, of course. The 'master finally produced Gensco's current coordinates, and smiled, and tapped the face of his screen with a manicured finger, as though he were trying to put his finger through the fabric of space and directly in Jes' dark, impatient face.

"Mind you," the 'master said, "I'm not promising that Gensco will lift a finger for you. They're an odd lot down there. Mind your sweet self, and for heaven's sake be polite. They don't take kindly to strangers in Priory, my dear. Not even wounded ones." The Grabmaster, for the last time, broke the connection.

Jes nursed his sloop down the coordinates given him by the Grabmaster of Priory Main. His hands flickered between the pressure gauges and the correction keys, his eyes between the sensors and the directional screens, and his mind, between curses and computations, considered the strangeness of Priory's Grabmaster. Of the 'master's oblique warning about Gensco, Jes thought not at all. Any station would help a ship in distress. It would be unthinkable not to.

Gensco Peripheral would not believe that Jes was who he said he was. He held his shuddering sloop steady amid the crowded skies, praying that no one would hit him. The accented voice on the commiter, alternately angry and exasperated, at last ran a scan on his ship and immediately signed off, leaving Jes shouting into a dead microphone. His eyes ached. He rubbed them with the balls of his thumbs and cursed Priory Sector and everyone in it.

"That's quite enough," said the commiter in light, slurred Priory accents. The screen shivered and cleared to show a fat, sharp-eyed woman who looked at Jes with disapproval. All the lines of her face angled toward her excess of chins. Her hair, thick and richly auburn, curved over her brow and

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around her cheeks; Jes wondered if all those shades of red and gold were natural. His own thick, black hair felt limp and dirty, and he resisted the urge to brush it back.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm not used to being treated as a pirate." She didn't return his smile. "I've a crippled ship. I need a repair dock and a good jockey, and I'll pay for repair fees, rentals, parts, and anything else. I beamed you my identification codes —"

"Codes can be forged, Menet..." she paused, glancing down. "Kennerin. We have our own security to worry about. And we're a very busy station, we can't take in every cripple that comes along demanding dock time."

"I believe you can't refuse," Jes retorted. "According to Federation regulations, and I can quote you section and paragraph if you want, it's a major offense to refuse aid to a ship in space." The woman opened her mouth, but Jes overrode her. "I don't think you have a choice, Quia. Refuse me and I'll beam a priority complaint to Priory Main. And even your tame monkey up there wouldn't dare ignore it."

The woman looked even more sour. "You, Menet Kennerin, are a good example of why we don't care for strangers here."

"Quia, if you don't give me dock time, and pretty damned quick, you're going to have more strangers in your system than you've ever seen before. I'll have every investigator and agent in the Federation on your ass."

The woman pressed her lips together and disappeared. Jes checked the pressure sensors; the patch was holding, but barely.

The woman reappeared. "We've dispatched a pilot drone to take you to a repair dock. You'll be issued a restricted visitor's pass, which you must carry at all times, and we expect you to leave as soon as the repairs are completed. You'll be billed for that, and for your room and board, and we want payment in Fremarks before you'll be allowed to leave."

"Your charity should be the basis for a thousand songs," Jes said. The woman's face pruned with disapproval and she signed off.

The pilot drone hooked onto the sloop's guidance system and the flight bank went dead. Jes sat back, his fingers resting on the pressure controls, and watched the vision screens.

Gensco Station was spherical, an enormous silver orange whose exterior was a maze of metal valleys and square metal mountains, overlaid with the bars and graphs of the flight directors. The space around it bristled with commerce. Small, powerful freight donkeys hauled pod upon pod of goods carriers; a fat, strangely shaped spacebus passed overhead; innumerable small ships darted between the larger vessels and the thick sprinkle of auxiliary satellites. Jes watched space and tattletales, and fretted. The drone led the sloop in a direction counter to

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the rotation of the station, then veered north before beginning its descent. An aperture irised open in the skin of the station, and the drone dropped toward it. Jes concentrated on balancing the pressure in the sloop's access hold against the changing pressure of the various airlocks. The drone guided the sloop to a resting place in a large, dimly lit bay, and slid back through the locks. Jes cracked the sloop's entry hatch and stuck his head into the bay.

To his left lay the skeleton of a small freighter, its curving struts dull with oxidation. On the right a skip-sloop lay gutted; a large, angry gash ran up the ship's forward hull, and burn marks darkened the lateral fins. Before him stretched other dead ships, all Delta-class or smaller, all decayed or in the process of being cannibalized for parts. The air smelled of old oil and ancient burns, and tasted stale. Jes climbed the hull of his sloop and peered at the damage; the plate had taken most of the leads wires with it, and those remaining were scarred beyond redemption. He touched the wires briefly, as though in apology, locked the sloop, and went in search of the jockey.

A light glimmered at the far end of the bay. As he approached he heard someone singing in an alien language. He paused, listening to the smooth, slippery melody. The voice slid from major to minor keys, exploring variations in a rich, controlled contralto. Then Jes stepped around the last dead ship into the light, and the singing stopped.

"Hello," he called. No one answered. The lighted area was deserted. Jes put out a hand to touch the hull of the ship behind him, reluctant to move forward. "Hello," he shouted, and his voice echoed back from the distant sides of the bay.

"Why, welcome to my parlor, said the spider to the fly." The voice was soft, amused, unaccented, and close by. "Let me guess. We have here an incompetent ore-jockey who bothered someone and has been sent to me? No, you don't have the look of one of our outstanding humpers. A private pilot for a disliked minor manager, come with dented chrome? I think not — you look far too fierce to be a tame captain. Whatever you are, my curious fly, you are certainly unpopular. And for that mystic deduction you will not be charged at all." The voice slid into song again. Jes glanced overhead to see a dark shape seated casually on a swing that dangled below a suspended hull. The harsh lights behind the swing dazzled his eyes.

The singing became laughter. "Discovered, by all that's cross and holy. State your business, please. I am, as you can see, a very busy person."

Jes shaded his eyes with his hand. "My name is Jes Kennerin. My tau-sloop pulled a leads plate in tau, and lost it entirely after I came through grab. Your managers sent me here for repairs."

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"Not *my* managers, my outlandish friend. Nor am I theirs, much to my dismay. I'm surprised they offered to help you at all."

"They didn't offer anything. I had to threaten them with a Federation complaint."

"Did you?" The voice was delighted. "My admiration for you increases by the second." The voice began humming.

"I'm in a hurry," Jes said evenly. "I'll be late as it is, and if you could —"

"Rush to your repairs, forsaking all others? Ah, but I've work and much work, to fill the days and ways of hands." As if in proof, Jes heard the sound of metal on metal, and some flakes of rust drifted into the light. He wondered if everyone in Priory Sector was crazy. "Still, I should endeavor to leave you with at least one good impression of Gensco Station, may its wane wax and its decrease increase."

The swing arched away from the light; then a dark figure leaped to grab a dangling line, and within a moment the jockey stood before Jes, grinning.

She was slightly smaller than himself, with long, silvery grey hair pulled into a messy knot at the nape of her neck. Her eyes, oval, and sardonic, were of a blue cooler and deeper than his, and her face was delicately furred from the neck of her suit to her hairline. Jes glanced at her hands and she obligingly raised them for his inspection. Small, curved claws slid from the silver fur and slid into hiding again.

"You're a ... "Jes began, and stopped in confusion.

"Santa Theresan," she said. "Or Tabby, if you prefer speaking in the present tense offensive." She gestured, and her claws flashed briefly. "Why don't you show me your ship, captain mine, and we can discuss philosophy and biology and anthropology and, perhaps, apology. You may stop staring now."

Jess flushed and marched toward the ship, hearing her footsteps behind him. The humming resumed, sweetly competent. Jes put his hands in his pockets and clenched his fists.

She swung up the side of his sloop and probed the wound, still humming, then insisted that he open the ship so she could inspect the damage on the inside. She peeked into the cabins, ran her fingers lightly over the control board, and gave a nod of approval when Jes unsealed the last lock. Removing a probe from the pocket of her blue suit, she stepped into the access hold and tested the emergency seal, then twisted the magnetic clamps and lowered them. Jes stared at her trim backside.

"No tail," she said without turning around. "And no pointy ears, and we don't go into heat and we don't bear in litters. Any other scurrilous myths you want quashed, Menet Curiosity?"

Jes flushed again. "I'm sorry," he said stiffly. "I've never met a Theresan before, and I've only heard a little."

"And all of it false. I live," she re-

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marked, "constantly surrounded by lies and liars. Beware of them, Menet. They will only lead you into sin." She slapped the bulkhead, then turned to him. "It will take some time, and I'll have to order the part from main, but I should be able to get you spacebound again."

"How long?" Jes said eagerly.

She shrugged. "Depends. On supplies in main, and the mood of their keepers. It's rarely easy to get supplies, and for me it's never easy. It might take weeks."

"Weeks!"

"At least," she said calmly and jumped out of his ship. "Don't bother to lock it, Menet. I'll need to get inside to repair it, and you may not want to be hauled away from your diversions and delights."

"I don't see that I'll have much to do...."

"Ah, but I've yet to introduce you to the wonders of Gensco Station, Peripheral Sector, Repairs Bay Colony. You've much and much to learn, my fly. You've yet to find either flowers or nectar. And you'll need a cabin. Come along, Menet Outworlder. We'll secure you a parlor of your own, to which you can invite any number of succulent little insects."

"I thought I'd sleep in my ship," Jes said.

The jockey pruned her face into a devastating, silvery imitation of the red-haired woman's scowl. "Regulations," she intoned in Priory accents. "No sleeping aboard disfunctional vessels. You will stay, Menet, in transient quarters, and no arguments."

"But —"

"On pain," the jockey said with positive relish, "of dismemberment." She grinned suddenly, and Jes, bemused out of anger, collected his gear and followed her swaying hair and lithe walk out of the bay and into the corridors of Gensco Station.

Her name, she told him, was Tatha, and she'd been on Gensco Station for six Standard months, working as a repairs jockey. That she didn't care for Gensco was obvious; that she, in turn, was disliked became apparent as they negotiated the corridors and cramped public spaces of Repairs Bay Colony. She ignored the "meows" and occasional murmurs of "here, kitty," and arriving at Transient Registry, she arranged a cabin for him, slicing through a maze of regulations and bureaucratic confusion. When they left the office, the air was thick with Tatha's sarcasm, and she allowed herself one triumphant glance at Jes before schooling her face to calm irony. She pointed out mess halls, restaurants, bars, and shops, and told him that transient quarters were divided into a section for visiting Gensco employees and a section for non-Gensco transients, mostly Labbers in on business. His cabin was in the Labber section.

"Gennys are taught hatred with

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their first breaths," she explained. "For Labbers, for outworlders, for aliens, for any strangers. For themselves. You'd perhaps not be in danger staying in the Genny section, but it's best to avoid the problem entirely. If possible. And, of course, you're blessed in not having fur."

She swayed on the slidebelt, and a gobbet of something smelling strongly of fish just missed her shoulder. It didn't break the flow of her conversation. Only, once in the small cabin she had secured for him, did Jes notice that her claws were half extended.

"Does that happen all the time?" he said.

"Yes." She ran her fingers over the comscreen. "This will give you general information, but it won't tell you the important things. Such as that eating in the company mess halls is guaranteed death, and Kevefah, the local brew, will give you a twenty-day hangover and cure your warts. Or possibly you don't drink?" Jes shook his head. "Good. I don't trust the totally innocent."

The chute bleeped and coughed out a small packet. Tatha scooped it up before Jes could reach it, and she unseamed it with one claw.

"Your symbols of existence, blue eyes," she said, flicking through the contents of the packet. "A restricted greenpass, you won't like that. Or possibly you won't be around long enough to learn not to like it. A room credit plate. Every day billing? Oh, they do indeed dislike you. This has the reek of an insulted Maigret about it. Did you have contact with a small, fat woman of incontinent tongue and quick temper? Reeking of the blood of children and small mammals? Red hair and eyes to match?"

Jes, grinning, sat on the bed. "Or someone very like," he agreed.

"Our sweet Maigret, in charge of making life interesting for the likes of you and me. It's a means of checking up on you, mysterious and dangerous unfurred alien. Maigret is very interested in strangers, right about now. She asked me to check out your accident."

"My accident?" Jes said, startled. "Why?"

"Accidents can be faked, plates can be lifted. I'm giving you a clean bill."

"Does she really think I'd damage my own ship? Who does she think I am?" Tatha simply looked at him. "Listen, I'm a tauCaptain trying to join my ship in MarketPort. That's all. And all I want is my ship fixed. Sweet Mother! Is everyone on this station crazy?"

"Not totally," Tatha said. She sat on the table and swung her legs idly. "I, for one, am entirely sane. And Maigret has her reasons ... you've come at a bad time, tauCaptain. But you'll manage." She went on to suggest which mess halls to avoid, which to patronize with caution ("Don't eat anything yellow, please."), and told him to speak in public as little as possi-

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ble ("You have an accent, you know.") She further suggested that he pack away his own clothing and buy some company issue. It would serve to keep him inconspicuous and harder to follow.

"Should I worry about being followed?" he said.

She shrugged. "What's your opinion? Never mind, you haven't been here long enough to have one. I've business, tauCaptain, among which is the ordering of your leads plate. Take a care." She swung off the table and out the door.

"Tatha —" he said. The door closd behind her.

He opened his sack and looked at the clothes niche uncertainly, decided that he wouldn't be on Gensco long enough to unpack, and sliding his Certificate among the folds of his clean suits, he closed the sack again. He secured a line on the commiter to the communications center and, after a great deal of shouting and nonsense, sent a message direct-line to his crew in MarketPort. Then, taking Tatha's suggestion, he ordered a standard blue company-issue suit and used the clensor while waiting for it. It popped through the chute as he came out of the clensor, drying himself. It was poorly made and scratched his skin at the seams. He took it off, put on his light-weather underclothes, and put the company suit on again. The greenpass and credit plate he stowed in his hip pocket, then sat at the commiter, secured a line to the main library computer, and requested information on Santa Theresa.

There wasn't much of it, and what there was seemed vague and far too general, as though it had been programmed directly from a second-level text.

Santa Theresa was one of the earliest colony planets, settled so far back that the dates were still reckoned by the old calendar. Before the discovery of tau and the invention of coils and taudrive, colonists had been sent in large, big-bellied ships to eight systems: Santa Theresa, the last planet colonized and the furthest from Terra, was a large, dense, cold world, rich in rare and costly minerals and miserly of its heat. Not fit for normal human habitation, the colony-masters declared, and in those days of slowdrives and limited xeno-technology, they created Theresans to serve the climate of their planet. Fur, to protect from the cold. An extra layer of subcutaneous fat, for the same reason, layered over a musculature slightly more powerful than that of unchanged Terrans. More sensitive eyesight, to cope with the long, dark winters. A metabolic system slightly altered to extract the maximum protein from foodstuffs. And claws replacing fingernails, retractable to facilitate the use of the hands; claws to capture and kill, for the colony-masters, taking into account the roughness of a new world, the distances between Santa Theresa and the

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mother world, the long cold winters and the short growing season, had decreed that Theresans be, when necessary, predators.

Yet changes were small. Theresans had hips and joints and sockets and limbs, curves and angles, that were distinctly human. Had features and expressions that were human. Had brains, minds, souls as human as those of the race from which they sprang.

Two centuries after Santa Theresa's colonization, Terra and her three closest colony worlds disagreed about levies and tax rights, and the disagreement quickly escalated into the Last Great War, which left two worlds in cinders and Terra herself badly scarred. War, always the parent of innovation, this time produced the discovery of tau and the invention of the grabcoils and taudrives. The universe opened, not to Terra, still sullenly rebuilding herself, but to Reba, Ha Olam, and Jirusan, the three untouched colonies. Santa Teresa, the youngest and most distant, was misplaced during the war years and lay forgotten for twelve centuries.

Twleve hundred years of tau changed humanity and changed its nature. Santa Teresa had been born during a time when the complexity and cost of space travel dictated a stable colony population; tau created a mobile workforce, independent of the need for special adaptation to any one planetary condition. Gene engineering, since the days of Theresa's foundation, had become a cosmetic art, and nothing more. Most importantly, Santa Theresa had sprung from a time when humanity had yet to meet any sapient aliens at all, and re-emerged into a universe where alien races were known, and regarded as, at best, the results of an inferior creation. The unchanged humans of the Federation were bewildered by the furred Theresans, urged to see them as alien, yet forced to recognize their human stock, to grant them citizenship and full rights in the Federation. For Theresans and humans could, together, produce fertile offspring, thereby meeting the most basic definition of shared species.

The computer could provide Jes with little else. Santa Theresa was a one-country planet, had a quasi-feudal system of government, spoke a language as different from Standard as Standard was different from any original Terran tongue. Santa Theresa had a short growing season and long, fiercely cold winters. Mined and exported ores, had a stable population, and was the only colonized or colonizable planet in its sector. According to the Theresans, there had been no regression of culture in the twelve centuries between its loss and rediscovery; they remembered, adapted, and flourished. The tape ended. Jes envisioned a frigid, lonely world, and could not picture Tatha's quick tongue and lithe songs in such a dim, unfriendly place. He closed the computer link

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and allowed himself exactly two hours of sleep before going in search of food.

He returned to find Tatha curled on his bed, scanning through his Certificate. He slammed the door, out of temper with bad-mannered waiters, badly cooked food, and exorbitant prices, and glared at her. She gave him a crooked smile, supremely unembarrassed, tossed his Certificate on the table and rolled off the bed. She wore a brown jumpsuit, and her silver face gleamed from the darkness of its hood.

"I've come to take you adventuring, my friend. And you had the discourtesy not to be here."

"I locked the door," Jes said, putting the Certificate back in his sack. "And I don't remember leaving this out, either."

"You had, and you hadn't. Locked doors are a specialty of mine, and if you thought you were hiding your record, you did a poor job of it. It's obvious that I've more to teach you than the ins and outs of Gensco Station." She leaned against the wall. "I've ordered your leads plate."

Jes grunted unpleasantly. Her eyes gleamed with laughter, and she crossed her arms, as though ready to spend all night, if need be, outlasting his anger. He found himself smiling back.

"Good. When will it arrive?"

"Having engineered your good humor, I'm loath to lose it again. I won't tell you. It's evening, by the dictates of the Lords of Gensco Station. Let's use it, and not for business." She laughed at his expression. "Drinking, tauCaptain. Deep and philosophical discussion. I've an urge to introduce you to the finer elements of Repairs Bay Colony. Will you come?"

He hesitated, feeling tired and still a little angry, then succumbed to his growing curiosity. Besides, Tatha had suggested that something out of the ordinary was afoot, and Jes was wise enough in the way of strange places to know that anything unusual deserved exploration. Tatha had also insinuated that Jes himself was under suspicion. The more he learned about Gensco, and about Tatha, the safer he would feel.

"All right," he said. "Bring on your wonders, and I'll be properly impressed."

Unexpectedly, she slipped around him, lifted his sack, and extracted his Certificate.

"This first," she said. "When in Rome, Menet, do as do the Romans, but hide your gold. Come along." She walked into the clensing unit.

"If everyone here is as nosy as you are...."

"Correction. I'm healthily inquisitive. With some others, the adjective does not apply." She glanced around the room, then swung herself atop the box of the clensor and leaned toward the light panel. She ran one extended claw under the clips, slid the panel away, and tucked Jes' Certificate

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between the ceiling and the drop panels. She snapped the panel back into place and dropped to his side.

"When you get back, change the angle of the panel clips, and remember the change. I doubt if our hosts, or others, are subtle enough to find the Certificate or if, finding it, they remember to reset the clip. Come along."

As they reached the door, she looked at it sadly and shook her head. "Nothing you can do about this, though. Junk."

Jes hesitated a moment, then followed her out, locking the door behind him.

"Why?" he said. "I mean, why the lessons in being sneaky, and why the invitation tonight."

"Simple. You're the only one on this station who even approaches being as alien as I am. And if I don't mind the onus of your suspect company, why should you mind mine?"

"I don't," he said, remembering the hostilities of the afternoon. "I can handle it ... you must be used to it."

"One never gets used to it," she said quietly. "We hop on here."

The slidebelt moved across the main public squares of Repairs Bay, through areas of after-work merrymaking and along the lit and flashing fronts of entertainment halls. Tatha leaned against the slidebelt railing, her back to the crowds and her face to Jes. In her dark suit with the hood pulled over her bright hair, she was, from behind, effectively disguised. Jes tried to watch her without obviously watching her, and thought he was successful until she suddenly crossed her eyes and stuck her tongue out. Flustered, Jes bit his lip and glanced away, and Tatha swung off the slidebelt so unexpectedly that it took him a moment to realize that she was gone. He hopped off and walked back to her. She was strolling down a side alley, her hands in her pockets, humming. She glanced at him, eyes amused, when he matched her pace.

"Do you fancy beer?" she said, pausing by an unmarked door.

Jes nodded.

"Good. Welcome to Tammas' Hopyard, Captain."

"Another parlor," Jes said as he stepped inside and heard her laugh behind him.

The crowded room was small and dark. People looked up briefly, then went back to their drinks and conversations. The barkeep nodded and turned, at Tatha's waved fingers, to fill two steins with beer. Tatha guided Jes to a table in the back of the room.

"Tammas' father came from The Lab, and it makes him bearable, if not adorable."

"The Grabmaster mentioned The Lab — the Labyrinth? I don't know what it is." Jes sat.

"An asteroid belt in one of the neighboring systems, same sector. The Labbers live in hollowed asteroids called 'holes' and bump about being im-

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mune to domestication. Gensco's been trying to wipe them out for decades."

"Why?"

"Because they don't fit." Tammas put the steins on the table, then rocked back on his heels. He was a tiny, sour-looking man, and he looked at Jes curiously. "Gensco wants everything to fit nice and simple and easy. Labbers have never worked that way, and aren't about to. Did you tell him," he said to Tatha, "about my Da?"

"I will, Tammas. We'll want another two soon."

Tammas nodded, unperturbed, and went back to his bar.

Jes sipped his beer. It was cold and tasted slightly flat. He made a face, and Tatha nodded.

"But it's the best you'll find, this side of Gem Sphere, or The Lab."

"What's Gem Sphere? And what about Tammas' father?"

Tatha put her stein down. "Gem Sphere is manager's country, my innocent. Gem Sphere is the heart and center of civilized living on Gensco Station. Parklands, fountains, mansions, finesse and richesse. I'll take you there, if you like. It will impress your impoverished provincial soul. And Tammas' father was a Labber brewmaster, who responded to a Gensco attack by flying his chunk of rock into a Master-Craft and crippling it. Unfortunately, Tammas survived. He was raised in the bosom of Gensco's love, and when they found that he didn't know anything of any use to them, and couldn't be made to like them, they sent him here. Very careful of their resources, Gensco is. Tammas makes a good barkeep, and as long as he's here, the managers know where to find pilots come in from The Lab on business. They don't mind that our bitter friend spreads sedition and sows the seeds of rebellion. The seeds fall on hard ground." She tapped her foot against the metal floor. "Tammas, of course, hates the entire business."

"Then why doesn't he leave? Why don't you leave, for that matter?"

Tatha, her mouth full of beer, looked at him over the rim of the stein. The hum of conversation in the room rose and fell, and Jes caught a brief scent of hot stew and what might be fresh bread.

"Tammas can't leave," Tatha said finally, "because he's nowhere to go. The Labbers that come to Gensco are here on sufferance. If they smuggled him off, they'd be open to charges of kidnapping or suborning a Gensco employee. If he leaves by himself, Gensco would suspect the same thing. An incident like that could start active warfare again, and The Lab's still recovering from the last bout. And Tammas, bless his twisted heart, is enough of a patriot to refuse to jeopardize The Lab for the sake of his freedom."

She turned in her seat and waved an arm at Tammas, who nodded and reached for two more steins.

"What about you?" Jes said. "It's

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not patriotism that's keeping you here."

"Not likely," Tatha said wryly. "Gensco's got a charming policy about outsystem workers. They take something you need and don't give it back. It's surprisingly effective."

"It's coercion," Jes said angrily.

Tatha shrugged. "I've told him, Tammas, about your Da." Tammas deposited full steins, collected empty ones, nodded gravely, and retreated.

Jes watched Tatha, and Tatha, leaning comfortably in her chair, watched the room. She fascinated him: the sleek slivery body, the expressive eyes, the quick, complicated mind. He wondered how she saw the room's collection of Labbers, wondered what, beneath the wit and chatter, she thought of the universe around her, the station, herself. He'd dealt with spacers before, and was confident that he could extract information. A little delicate probing, he thought, was in order.

She obliged. No, she hadn't known about Gensco before she entered the station. Yes, Gensco had made it hard for her to leave. No, she did not learn jockeying on Santa Theresa. When he asked her why she'd left her homeworld, she put the stein down and looked at him pleasantly.

"Your Certificate says that you were born on Aerie, tauCaptain. You'd go back at least thrice a year, but for the past two years you haven't been back at all. Why is that?"

Jes looked at her angrily. "That's none of your damned business."

"Exactly," she said, standing. "Come exploring, Menet? I promised you the wonders of Gem Sphere, and my promises, you'll learn, are always kept."

Jes rose, embarrassed. A little delicate probing, indeed. He followed her from the bar, but she gave him no chance to apologize, merely strode down the alley ahead of him. Jes decided that she was too prickly for her own good, and hurried to catch up with her.

But her face, lit quickly as she passed a lamp, seemed unconcerned. She led him around three corners in quick succession and into a maze of empty supply lines. The lights were off; Tatha, in her dark hooded suit, was a denser darkness and a melody in front of him. When she touched his chest he halted, and she pointed out the far glow of a tubegate. Not one of the main gates, she explained, but an auxiliary one, maintained for the passage of freight.

"Gateway to heaven," she said sarcastically. "Feeling adventurous? Good. Mind, we're not welcome in Gem Sphere, we lack the odor of jewels and high living. Keep your shining head down and your ringing voice low, my dove, and do as you're told. Ready? Then boldly forward. It gets darker before the gate, so mind your step — the pavement's uneven."

He walked forward, feeling her

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warm hand resting on his shoulder. It did indeed get darker before the gate, and within two meters he stumbled over a ragged edge in the pavement and fell, taking her with him. She twisted nimbly to her feet, found his hand, and helped him up. Then she raised her hand, ran her fingers along a ledge high on the wall, and rubbed her fingers against his palm. They felt gritty.

"The Lords and Masters don't believe in changing the filters regularly, at least, not in the warrens. Or in maintaining the pavements." She put her hand back on his shoulder and resumed humming. The melody sounded contemptuous.

Just beyond the lights from the gates she halted again. "Do me a favor? Pop through and see if there's anyone around. Some louts I want to avoid."

Jes nodded and walked to the gate, wondering if Tatha was as hard as she let on. Feeling protective, he surveyed the empty gate area thoroughly before gesturing to her. She ran past him, grabbing his hand and propelling him down a smoothly cushioned drop-tube. They scampered through the brightly lit space at the foot of the drop, then into a dark side corridor. Once away from the light, she leaned against the wall and laughed quietly. Her hood had fallen back. She twisted thick handfuls of silver hair into place and pulled the hood low over her forehead.

"And again the slip! Come, master mariner of space, and I'll show you the glittering byways of Gem Sphere."

Gem Sphere did indeed glitter. Layered between the outer service areas of the station and the inner power cores, it filled the entire center stratum of the station. The tall vault of ceiling reflected pinpoints of starlike lights, the fresh air smelled of flowers, and somewhere in the darkness a fountain burbled gently. Tatha led him between high white buildings whose windows glowed with light. They moved along the edge of a park, peering from the bushes at finely clothed people strolling beneath trees in the amber light of floating lamps. Someone played a twelve-tone tairene expertly; Tatha, eyes closed, listened intently to the subtle chiming music. A child laughed. Jes gaped and stared. At a silk-draped stand, crystal goblets of wine stood ready for sale. Jes told himself firmly that the denizens of Gem Sphere couldn't possibly live this way all the time, that during the daylight hours they had jobs to do, work to be done, but he didn't really believe it.

Tatha scanned the passing faces and touched Jes to stillness. Three people sat on a bench by a fountain: an older man with polished grey hair; a tiny, dun-colored woman in rich brocades; and the red-haired woman who had talked with him when he arrived at Gensco in his crippled sloop

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and whom Tatha had later identified as Maigret. The three leaned together, talking. Tatha moved forward cautiously. Maigret, after a time, rose, shook out the folds of her robes, and walked away. Tatha slid back through the bushes to Jes and led the way out of the park.

She moved faster now, leading him through a maze of alleys and dark streets. They ran up a flight of shallow stairs to a wide stone balcony. Tatha put her hand on the rail and vaulted into the blackness below. Overcome with a joyous recklessness, Jes followed her. The ground was closer than he'd thought, and he gasped slightly as he landed.

Tatha put her hand on his arm. "We're being followed. Can you keep up with me?"

Jes heard the challenge in her tone and would have replied, but she put her finger over his lips and raced away. He leaped to his feet to follow. Someone landed under the balcony with a thud and a muttered curse. Jes didn't bother to look back.

Jes discovered that keeping up with Tatha would not be as easy as he'd assumed. She moved swiftly and economically, and he envied the quick precision of her body as he followed her around a pool and over a hedge. They fled down a street of shops. In the light of one of the few glowlamps, Jes saw a pile of fruit, left by an overtrusting grocer in the street before the shop. Tatha grabbed two shining globes from the bottom of the pyramid. The rest of the fruit trembled, and the pyramid collapsed onto the street. The footsteps behind them became awkward thuds as their pursuer tried to dodge the rolling fruit. Tatha glanced over her shoulder and tossed a fruit to Jes. It tasted tart, and the juice flooded his mouth. At the next corner he paused, aimed, and flung the fruit back down the street. Tatha grinned and ducked into a stand of trees. Jes followed her into darkness, and she put her hand in his and guided him around the trees.

"Can you fit through here?" she whispered.

The open pipe mouth was a black patch against the paler darkness of the trees. He dropped on his belly, scooted inside, and kept going until he felt Tatha's touch on his ankle.

"Next right," she said, her voice choked with laughter. He followed her signals until the tube opened before him and he looked down at the bright area before the supplies gate. He made sure the area was deserted, then pulled himself half out of the tube, twisted, dropped, and landed on his feet. In a second Tatha was beside him, and a moment later they were up the drop-tube again and sprinting down the dark supply line. Tatha slowed to run her fingers over the ledge, then raced him to the alley in front of Tammas' Hopyard.

Light spilled from Tammas' open door. Jes, catching his breath, looked

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at Tatha and doubled with laughter. Her brown jumpsuit was filthy, and her hair had come loose and lay tangled on her shoulders. A leaf had caught in it. He pulled the leaf from her hair and presented it to her. She took it gravely and in turn handed him his greenpass.

Jes looked at the pass and stopped laughing. He stuck his other hand in his pocket and felt around.

"Where did you get this?" he said.

"From your pocket, when you fell before we reached the gate. They trigger alarms, and I decided that you wouldn't miss it."

Jess looked at her, confused. She looked back at him with patient expectation. He put the greenpass in his pocket, beside the credit plate.

"You've quite a few skills," he said finally. "Who was following us? Maigret?"

"Hardly. Our red-haired friend owes us a favor — whoever followed you was, originally, following her."

"Followed *me*? We were both trespassing."

"We weren't followed by Gensco, tauCaptain. If we had been, they'd have raised alarms and closed down the gates."

"Then who...."

Tatha shrugged and walked past Tammas' bar. "I was rather hoping you knew."

The slidebelt was off for the night, the lights dimmed, the crowds dispersed. Tatha didn't speak as they crossed the square and moved down the corridor toward Jes' cabin, but when they reached his door she put her hand over his mouth, forestalling his questions.

"Ask me tomorrow," she said quietly. "But before you go to bed, request the file I've noted on the back of your greenpass. And sleep well, my fly." She turned swiftly and disappeared around a bend in the corridor.

Jes unlocked his cabin and went in. He stood in the clensor until he felt clean, trying to ignore his weariness, then sat before the commiter and punched in the file number. The screen presented him with a reproduction of a fax sheet, some months old.

Gensco, the fax reported, had received a take-over bid of surprising size and, after due consideration, had turned it down. A second offer was made and again rejected. No further offers were pending. The managers assured all residents and employees that they would never sell Gensco to any agency, no matter how big, and urged confidence in tones which seemed a shade hysterical. The bidding party was Parallax.

By first light, Jes felt the effects of the wake-up he'd taken begin to wear off. He dialed another dose and resumed pacing the cabin.

There were no further public reports on the bids, although Jes tried to key information under every heading he could imagine. He found nothing

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further on Santa Theresa, either, but that proved nothing.

A combine as large as Parallax could pick its agents from any part of the Federation; but if Tatha was a Parallax agent, why would she take him on that midnight trespass? And certainly Gensco was not interested in Aerie-Kennerin, although Parallax would be. Parallax wanted Aerie-Kennerin, Jes knew that; in Parallax's hands, Jes could serve as a hostage against his family's quiet capitulation. But he couldn't see how his presence would aid or hinder the Parallax-Gensco bid at all.

Yet if Tatha was not a Parallax agent, why had she assumed that a stray tauCaptain named Jes Kennerin would have any interest in the Parallax-Gensco bid?

If she was a Gensco agent, then why trespass? And if their pursuer had been a Parallax agent, why was the agent following a stray Theresan and a stranded tauCaptain?

"Whoever followed *you*..." Tatha had said.

But she'd broken into his room, read his Certificate, and neatly picked his pocket, all in the course of one evening.

Faced with an unsettling conundrum, Jes reacted in the time-honored manner of all blunt, square-seeing Kennerins. He marched down to the repair bay to confront Tatha.

His sloop hung, suspended, high over the floor of the bay. Jes walked under it, shouting Tatha's name, until her face appeared over the side of the ship.

"Come on up," she said and disappeared.

There seemed no way up save the dangling, knotted rope that hung from a high beam. He flexed his hands, remembering the hours he'd put in on his ship's swing-gym, and started up the ropes.

He'd conveniently forgotten that a ship's gym functions in freefall; by the time he reached the sloop his hands felt permanently cramped, and the muscles in his shoulders burned. He sat near Tatha and rubbed his shoulders. The burned leads were scattered around her, and her laserpencil glowed as she soldered new leads into place.

"You haven't slept," she said conversationally. "That stunts the growth, you know."

"I'm used to sleeping in hammocks. I haven't been able to sleep in a regular bed since I went to space."

"Flexibility is a virtue," she said severely and reached for the wires. Jes picked one out and handed it to her.

"Why did you want me to look at that file?"

Tatha, the wire between her teeth, didn't answer. The connection was smoothly made, and she released the wire and pressed it into its groove.

"I thought you might be interested."

"Why?"

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"Why not?"

"Tatha," he said, annoyed, and she smiled.

"It's the reason Gensco's edgy right now. Not that they're friendly at the best of times, but you came in the middle of a big scare. Another wire, please."

Jes complied, then lay on his belly and propped his chin in his hand.

"I don't see why they're so worried," he said. "Surely it's not the first time someone's tried to buy them out."

"For these folk, it is. And Parallax is not your all-around good guy."

"Why not?"

"Oh, come now, you're not that innocent. You've heard of Parallax — everyone has."

Jes raised his eyebrows. "They're just a large combine. I don't know why they want to buy Gensco, but if they've been refused, they'll go away."

Tatha glanced at him. "Parallax is a stubborn bunch, captain. They don't make offers lightly, and they don't accept negatives. Gensco has no intention of being bought and knows Parallax's reputation and is running scared."

"So?"

"Parallax is looking for a lever, something they can use as a hostage, to force Gensco's capitulation." She put down her laserpencil and opened her collar, "A hostage," she repeated bitterly. She looked at Jes and the corners of her mouth twitched. "Think they'll find it?"

"How should I know?"

"Exercise your imagination, tau-Captain. If you were a lone agent for a big company, under orders to find a lever for a take-over bid, a lever that won't damage the company such that it's rendered worthless, where would you look? What sort of thing would you aim for? How would you go about finding it? And how would you go about obtaining it?"

"And why would a stray Theresan want to know?"

"Meow," Tatha said.

Play along, Jes thought. Information runs two ways. He frowned.

It had to be something that Gensco could not easily replace but that Parallax did not particularly need; if Gensco decided to sacrifice the hostage, Parallax would have to be able to destroy it without destroying the company. And that immediately cut out most of the technical aspects of the Station, the power cores, life-support systems, communications net. Tatha pointed out that an invidual manager would also not serve the purpose; Gensco's owners lived in well-protected seclusion on a distant planet, and the managers themselves, despite their individual talents, were interchangeable and hence easily replaceable. Any attempt to capture the Station by siege or attack would also be impracticable: Parallax would either have to bring warships in through Federation tau, which was illegal and bound to incur Federation discipline,

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or would have to assemble the ships in Priory Sector. But the Sector was well patrolled, Tatha said, and any such ship-building operation would be soon discovered and destroyed.

Tatha began humming, the same slippery tune Jes had heard when he first met her. Jes shrugged.

"I don't know what an agent would look for," he said finally. "If it were my job, I suppose I'd creep about poking into things, and take what came. Watch out for anything secretive. Keep alert."

Tatha nodded. "Especially to unexpected occurrences. Like people sneaking about in the bushes in Gem Sphere."

"If I were an agent for Gensco, I'd be interested in the same thing."

"Indeed you would."

Jes took a deep breath. "All right. Why were we creeping about in the bushes last night?"

"You wanted to see Gem Sphere, didn't you?"

"That's not responsive. You were looking for something, weren't you? When you eavesdropped on Maigret — what were you looking for?"

"Why, I'm incurably curious. I told you that before."

"Will you answer me?" Jes demanded. He stood up. Tatha didn't break the rhythm of her work.

"The ones you've asked, or the ones you haven't? I gave you the Parallax file code because, Menet, that's who Maigret thinks you are. She was telling the others last night. Dear me, you do look astounded. Surely it's not that surprising—"

"It's absurd! Me? Sweet Mother — I'll tell her. That's what's holding everything up, isn't it?" Jes laughed a bit wildly. "All I have to do is tell Maigret that I'm not, and we'll have all the parts we need immediately."

"And how, friend, are you going to convince her that you're not a Parallax agent?"

Jes stared at her. What, indeed, would he say to Maigret? That Parallax had tried to take over his homeworld once? That the indications were that they were gearing up to do it again? How could he prove that to Maigret's satisfaction? Worse, what if Parallax made its attempt against the Station while Jes was still aboard? And Maigret survived? Would she curry favor with her new masters by bringing them tauCaptain Jes Kennerin, head on platter? Maigret, he remembered, seemed very easy to spy upon.

And Tatha said, echoing his thoughts, "There *is* a Parallax agent on Gensco, Jes. The agent's been here for at least a month. And is as capable of eavesdropping as I am. Another thing — we've no guarantee that the agent is an outsider. It could be a member of management, or the staff. It could even be Maigret."

"It could even," Jes said slowly, "be you."

"It could," Tatha agreed. "But it isn't."

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"Am I to believe that?"

"I've never lied to you," she said easily. "And, you'll notice, I've no interest in learning just how you would go about convincing Gensco that you're not the agent, because I think your argument would interest Parallax intently. I don't want you to tell me."

"Because you know already?"

Tatha shook her head.

"I don't believe you," he said, his temper rising. He made no effort to control it. "All I know of any of this has come from you, and you may be the best liar in the Federation. Who the hell are you anyway?"

"I've already told you," she said. "You simply have to arrange to believe it."

Jes lost his temper entirely. "All right. No more games. I don't like webs and I don't like plots and I don't particularly like you, either. You and Gensco and Parallax and this entire damned Sector can go to hell. All I want is to have my ship fixed. Now. *And no more games!*"

"Linear thinking is not only boring, it's unproductive," Tatha remarked.

Jes cursed. "You can call me when the job's done," he said, grabbing the rope. Tatha dropped the leads wires and put her hands in her lap. She looked at Jes expectantly.

"And I won't be coerced," he shouted before swarming down the rope. As he marched out of the bay, he heard Tatha's voice above him, raised cheerfully in song.

His daily billing was waiting for him when he returned to his cabin. He paid it, cursing, and yawned. The effects of the second wake-up had worn off, and his muscles felt slack and heavy. Except for his two-hour nap the day before, he'd been without sleep for three Standard days. He sat on the bunk and rubbed his eyes, and seeking nothing more than a moment's rest, he lay back and slept for ten hours.

He woke refreshed and ravenously hungry, and it seemed that the problems he'd taken with him to sleep had smoothed themselves. Feeling that, with some deplorably linear thinking, he could easily clear up any and all misunderstandings, he showered, dressed, and made his way to Tammas' Hopyard.

Save for Tammas and a small woman in an odd green spacer's suit, the bar was empty. Jes entered and sat at the bar, and Tammas came over to scowl and flap his traditional cleaning rag on the counter.

"Tatha said you serve food," Jes said. "I could use some."

"Stew," Tammas muttered, glaring.

"Fine. Do you have any juice?"

Tammas' brows nearly met, and he straightened his shoulders. "I run a saloon, Menet. Not a bloody nursery."

"A beer then," Jes said, resigned.

Tammas nodded, still scowling, and disappeared through a door behind the bar. Jes saw the small woman looking at him.

"Well, you're obviously not a Gen-

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ny," she said amiably. "Your accent is thick as curds."

"And you're not one, either," he replied. "My ship blew a leads plate in tau, and I had to come in for repairs."

She hooted. "You sure picked the wrong place to look for help. Are you getting any?"

"After a fashion. They sent me to some crazy Theresan."

"Tatha? I've heard about her." The woman stuck out her hand. "Name's Min Calder, bumpcaptain from East Lab."

"Jes Kennerin." Jes shook her hand. "You're here on business?"

"Such as it is. We had to make a run in and I pulled the short straw. Gensco makes me twitchy."

Jes rolled his eyes in agreement, and Tammas came backwards through the door, turned, and put a bowl on the counter before Jes. Steam rose from hunks of meat and vegetables. Tammas provided spoon, beer, and bread, and Jes ate hungrily.

"You going to be here long?" Min said.

Jes shrugged and swallowed. "As long as it takes to fix my sloop. And for all I know, that may take forever."

"Me, I'm stuck here for another two, three days. The idiots don't have the return cargo ready. So here I am with nothing to do but hang around Tammas', and I'm getting pretty tired of watching beer drinkers."

Jes paused with a spoonful of stew halfway to his mouth. It was as obvious an effort to pick him up as any he'd encountered. He glanced at her obliquely. Trim, tiny woman, brown hair, brown eyes, laugh-lines grooved about the mouth. She smiled back at him and turned to call an order to Tammas, letting Jes take his time.

She's a Labber, Jes thought. Labbers have no love for Gensco — one could easily be spying for Parallax. He shook his head, annoyed. Gensco had no love for the Lab, either, and would be doubly suspicious of any Labber come aboard. Getting as bad as Tatha, he told himself. When Min finished placing her order, Jes smiled at her.

"What's to do on Gensco Station, aside from drinking beer?"

"Oh, I think we could manage to come up with something."

"Something," with Min, became spending the rest of the day wandering through the public areas of Repairs Bay Colony, peering in the shops and gossiping maliciously about the inhabitants. Min had a quick, sharp tongue and used it lavishly; her gripes about Gensco were all solid, realistic, and devoid of plots, counterplots, and subtle intricacies. Jes found it refreshing, and during the course of the afternoon he learned quite a lot about Gensco, from an enemy's point of view.

"Of course they're bloody-minded bastards," Min said at one point. They were leaning over the railing of an overpass, watching the movement of cargo cubes through a transparent sup-

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ply line. "You know that one of the first things they attack in the Lab are the children's worlds? They try to capture them, to raise our kids as stinking Gennys, and if they can't capture, they kill. We've had to move the worlds time and again, lying about where they are — we'll get as bad as they are, eventually. You got any kids?"

Jes shook his head. "Nieces and nephews until hell won't have it, but none of my own."

"Me neither. I've been thinking of it, though. It'd be nice to have a kid around the hole, keep me from getting lonely. My lover's got a kid — I kind of envy her, having someone brand new to bring up. You know what the Genny bastards do with theirs?"

"What?"

"Freeze them. You come to work on Gensco and you've got kids, they take them somewhere and put them on hold until you can get them out of hock again."

"Mother! Wouldn't it be simpler to control births? Or to abort?"

Min looked at him. "Come on, tau-Captain, you can do better than that. Gensco's got two aims." She ticked them off on her fingers. "Keep the population steady and, second, keep the population quiet. They rotate workers for five-year terms, and if they have kids, they take them. Behave yourself, you get your kids back. Don't behave yourself, and...." She gestured expressively. "Is it any wonder that every Genny's a blood-picker? If your own folk can do that to you, you've got to believe that outsiders will be even worse."

"Sweet Mother." Jes looked at her with amazement. "The parents must object. Hell, if they did that with a kid of mine —"

"You'd have no choice. Whip away goes the kid while you're not looking, and if you don't behave yourself, they off the kid."

"I don't believe you."

"It's the truth. Rumor is that they keep the cold creche somewhere well hidden, along with anything else they want to keep safe. You know how they keep off-system workers here?"

"Yeah. Take something they need and don't give it back."

"There was an old fellow here once, they took away his spare lung. Real effective. Or they take any money you've got, and the wages they pay all go toward keeping you alive here. Room, board, rental space in the yards — hell, they even regulate the air, call it a sanitation tax. You can't pay your way off, and you can't save enough to get off, and you can't get your hands on anything you brought with you. Out-system workers aren't rotated — it's a life sentence. And they claim that *we're* barbarians."

"Then why bother with them at all?"

"We have to. They want our ores, and they've closed all our other markets. We *have* to sell to Gensco, at Gensco's prices. But they want us off-

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ed, too. We're anarchistic, we don't come pre-packaged, and we don't fit into boxes. And that offends them." Min looked up at Jes and shook her head. "You want my advice, Kennerin, you'll raise hell until your ship's fixed, and you'll lam it out of Priory as fast as you can. Whoever you are and whatever you want and wherever you're from, you sure as hell don't need this."

Jes silently agreed. The light had paled to evening. They left the bridge and bounced from one entertainment hall to another, playing the games, gambling, watching the shows. They were constantly surrounded by the quick, slurred accents of Priory speech, and Min kept her own voice low, touching Jes' arm whenever he spoke too loudly. He didn't understand why until, backed against the bar in a crowded cabaret, someone jostled his elbow sharply, sending his drink flying out of his hand to drench the Genny on his other side. The Genny spun around, glowering.

"I'm sorry," Jes said. "Someone hit my arm. Here, let me help you clean up."

The Genny tensed his shoulders and glared down at Jes. "Hey, folks, we've got us a pigeon," he said unpleasantly. "You keep your pigeon hands off me. I've heard that story before."

"It was an accident," Jes said firmly. "I said I'm sorry." Min was tugging at his arm. Jes tried to shake her off. The crowd had moved back, leaving a small clearing around them.

"Not only am I wet," the Genny said, "not only is my evening fucked, but I'm probably covered with alcoholic pigeon germs." The people laughed.

Jes shook Min away and clenched his hands. "Back where I come from, we teach people to be polite to strangers. Some folk need to have the lesson beat into them."

The Genny obligingly raised his fists. Min glanced at the doorway and yelled "Pols!"

Immediately the Genny swung away and disappeared into the crowd, which just as quickly went back to drinking and conversations. Jes stood alone, bewildered, his fists raised foolishly before him. Min grabbed his arm and pushed him to the door. There were no pols in sight.

"You idiot," she said, when they were on the street again. Jes looked at her with surprise. She was shaking.

"Haven't you been in a barroom fight before?" he said.

"That's not the point. You know how the Gennys hate us. One barroom fight could spread until every Labber on the Station is dead. And it wouldn't stop there."

"Oh, come on. A fight between a Genny and an outworlder?"

"And me, Kennerin." She took a deep breath. "We've barely recovered from the last battle — if they chose to come at us now, we're lost. That last bout was started by a Labber who accused a Genny of cheating on a cargo

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load. And got strung up for it." Min paused. "We lost four hundred people in ten days, including a whole lot of my family. I like you, Kennerin, but I swear to God, do that again and I'll kill you myself."

She was still shaking. Jes put his hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry, Min. The more I learn about this Sector—"

"The happier you'll be to be off it. You won't be the only one. Someone bumped you deliberately."

Jes stared at her. She nodded. "Don't ask me why, and don't ask me who. I was standing next to you and someone stuck a hand between us and hit your elbow. Next thing, you were getting ready to be creamed. You're dangerous company, Kennerin."

Jes slid his arm around her shoulders and resisted the impulse to shiver himself.

"If I promise to behave myself, will you put up with me a while longer?"

Min silently put her arm around his waist and fit her tiny body into the curves of his tall one. By the time they reached Tammas', though, her ebullience reasserted itself, and Jes began to think he had imagined the entire thing. They ate, drank, talked, laughed, and, entering Min's cabin at the end of the evening, took an amiable, easy pleasure of each other.

When he woke, Min had left. A note, propped on the table, said that she'd gone to cope with cargo handlers and she'd be at Tammas' later in the day. Jes tossed the note in the disposer, showered, and returned to his own cabin through the purposeful bustle of the morning. He kept his head well down, and didn't speak. Reaching his own cabin without incident, he let the muscles of his chest relax and opened the door to chaos.

The room had been thoroughly ransacked: bedding ripped apart, the contents of his sack scattered on the floor, the clothes niche flung open, the empty drawers of the desk upside down amid the wreckage on the floor. Jes snapped the door closed behind him and stared at the mess in shock. Then he ran to the clensor unit and reached for the light panel. The clips were angled as he'd left them, and the Certificate, untouched, rested in its hiding place. He reset the clips and quickly repaired the damage to the room. Nothing had been taken and nothing, save his own peace of mind, had been destroyed.

Not Tatha, he thought as he worked. She'd have made a far neater job of it, for one. And she couldn't have been the one who jostled him the night before, not a Theresan in a crowd of xenophobic Gennys. He finished cleaning up, wolfed down the unpleasant breakfast provided by the chute, and marched off to Tatha's repair bay.

His sloop remained suspended overhead, but the lights around it were dark. He swarmed up the rope, switched on his pocket light, and swore as he looked at the damaged area. Tatha had left it exactly as it had been the day be-

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fore: new wires scattered around the gap, a few wires half-connected, a couple of tools lying on the metal hull.

Jes let himself get furious. He slid down the rope, slammed out of the bay, and, reaching his room, demanded of the commiter that it connect him with Maigret. Instead he found himself shunted from one bureaucrat to another, all of whom listened to his complaint with distaste and passed him along the line, until he found himself faced with the person who had originally taken his call. And: "I'm sorry," he was told. "We're far too busy to deal with this. You've been assigned a jockey, and we've no time to disrupt the entire workschedule of the Station because you can't get along with her. You're being done a favor, Menet Kennerin. Please remember that."

Jes cursed at length in Standard and in Kaseri, with all the righteous indignation of a reasonable being faced with irrational nonsense. Then, deliberately calming himself, he sat at the desk and did some heavy-duty thinking.

He couldn't take his sloop out until she'd been repaired. He could resolder the leads wires himself but could not obtain a leads plate without Tatha's help. Tatha, though, had made it quite clear that she would not help him unless he helped her. With what? Jes shook his head and left the question for later.

Think elliptically, he told himself. Suppose that there was a Parallax agent on Gensco, that the agent had followed them in Gem Sphere, that the agent had overheard Maigret's suspicions about Jes. The agent would have followed Jes to find out who, in fact, he was. And would attempt to divert Gensco's suspicions onto Jes, thereby taking the pressure off himself. In which case, the ransacking of Jes' cabin would have happened before the incident in the entertainment hall.

Further: it was entirely likely that the agent would know nothing about Aerie-Kennerin. True, if the agent reported to Parallax and Parallax ran a search on the report, Jes Kennerin's name would set off bells. But the agent wasn't likely to beam a report, and thereby jeopardize cover, before the mission was completed. And Parallax was not likely to blow *its* plans by making any special effort to capture Jes while Gensco remained free.

He could protect himself, he decided, by keeping his head down and his temper in check, by staying out of trouble, and by making sure that Tatha fixed his ship as soon as possible. And if that meant playing her game, or pretending to, it was a price he'd be prepared to pay for his own freedom.

He returned to the repair bay and, picking up Tatha's laserpencil, began soldering the leads himself. He finished the work, put down the pencil, and rubbed his eyes. The next stage needed a larger laser, and he didn't know where Tatha kept her tools. He left the

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tools he'd used stacked neatly at the rope's end and, after cleaning up, went to Tammas' Hopyard and ordered a beer.

Tatha was not there, and Tammas said he hadn't seen her since breakfast that morning. But Min came in a few minutes later and detailed the days mishaps with Gensco Cargo. Jes leaned back in his chair until he had a clear view of the doorway. The bar filled during the course of the evening, and the air grew dim and stale. Tammas, catching his eye, shrugged sourly and brought more beer.

"If she comes in," Jes said to him, "will you tell her that I was looking for her? And would you tell her —"

"That you're sorry? She said you'd say that. I'll tell her."

Jes glared at Tammas' retreating back, then turned to answer the question in Min's expression.

"Tatha's disappeared," he said. "I think she thinks I insulted her, and I want to apologize so she'll finish work on my ship."

Min raised her eyebrows. "She doesn't sound like the type to get huffy over an insult."

"The hell with her," Jes said. "You want to leave?"

Min nodded and pushed her beer away. "For you, anytime."

They were asleep, pressed together in Jes' narrow bed, when Jes woke to the sound of the door closing softly. He reached for the light switch beside the bed.

"It's okay," Tatha's voice whispered. She sounded tired. "It's me, don't panic. Turn it on low."

"I'm not alone," Jes whispered back.

"I know." There was a soft rustling, Tatha crossing the room to sit, Jes presumed, on the edge of the table. "Tammas said you were looking for me."

"Surely you expected that." When Tatha did not reply, he said, "Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell at you. All I want is my ship fixed so I can get out of this crazy Sector."

"A consummation devoutly to be wished," Tatha said. "I know who's with you, and I know she's not asleep. Turn on the light, Jes. I need help."

"Min?"

"Go on," Min said. "I'm awash with curiosity."

Jes sat and pressed the switch gently. A faint glow filled the cabin. Tatha was indeed perched on the edge of the table.

"More," she said. Jes turned the light higher, gasped, and jumped from the bed.

Tatha's brown suit was in tatters, her hair crusted with dirt, and one hand held her shoulder tightly. Between her fingers, heavy blood welled slowly to trickle down the fur of her bare arm. Her eyes were heavy with pain and exhaustion.

Min rolled from the bed, crossed to

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Tatha, and pulled her hand away from her shoulder. A dirty wound showed beneath the blood-soaked fur.

"What else?" Min demanded.

"Bumps and bruises, but this is the worst." Tatha put her hand over the wound again and grimaced sharply. "You'd better leave."

"But you need help—"

"Kennerin has surgeon's citations. You don't want to get involved — you've yourself and The Lab to protect."

Min reached for her clothing. "Is it that bad?"

"I don't know. It may be. You don't want to know about it."

Min bit her lip, nodded, and dressed swiftly. She paused at the door, fumbled in her belt pouch, and tossed something to Jes. "This might help," she said. "You won't want to order supplies." She slid through the door and closed it behind her.

Jes looked at the emergency medical packet in his hand, then at Tatha.

"Do you want a full-scale explanation now or later?" she said.

"Sweet Mother," Jes said, exasperated. "Lie on the bed."

Tatha slid from the table and swayed. Jes caught her and carried her to the bed, stripped the jumpsuit from her, and threw it in the disposer. He began cleaning the area of the wound with water. Tatha clenched her teeth.

The incision was not as deep as he'd feared, but it was wide and long and filthy. He stared at it, tapping his lip with his finger.

"It needs stitching," he said. "We'll have to find a doctor."

"We can't. You've enough citations, you can handle this."

"God, Tatha. I don't have any anaesthetic—"

"If you call a medic, they'll kill me. I swear it, Jes." She grinned pallidly. "It's up to you, brave one. I may faint, but I trust that you won't."

Jes quelled a moment of sickness. He'd done his share of stitching before, but never on an unanaesthetized patient. Tatha looked at him, dirty grey face, tangled silver hair, her bloodshot eyes calmly expectant. Jes took a deep breath, nodded, and opened the kit.

She fainted when he began cleaning the wound. He worked faster, trying to get most of it done before she woke. When the needle entered her skin, she moaned and stirred; and he bound her body to the bed, placed his fingers briefly on her throat and determined that her pulse was steady, and continued grimly with the stitching. Finished, he looked critically at the job, decided that it would hold, and layered strips of protective absorbent and clingtape over the wound. Finally he checked her pulse again, peeled back her lids to look at her eyes, released her bindings, and bound her arm tightly to her waist. He covered her with a blanket and sat back in the cabin's one chair. After a while, unexpectedly, he slept.

He woke a few hours later, muscles

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stiff, and went to the bed. Tatha lay still, breathing evenly and deeply. He checked her pulse again, relying, as before, on its steadiness and not on its speed. He had no idea what the normal pulse rate of a Theresan was, nor of normal temperature. She showed no signs of waking. He pulled on his suit and went to the repair bay, where he shimmied up the rope and into his ship. He removed a range of antibiotics and analgesics from the medical supply rack and put them in his pocket, added an extra roll of absorbent and tape, and slid down the rope again. Tatha was awake when he returned.

"I don't know which antibiotics you can take," he said, emptying his pockets. "Or pain killers. So I brought a range of them. I cleaned the wound as thoroughly as I could, but without a diagnostat — the stuff's from my sloop."

"I thought so. You're stubborn, but you're not stupid." She tried to sit up, and Jes came to help her. "I'm filthy," she said with distaste.

"I'll give you a bath."

Tatha laughed. "I'm not paralyzed, Kennerin. I can clean myself."

Jes looked at her dubiously but helped her to the clensor. While she bathed he stripped the dirty sheets from the bed, dumped them, and ordered a new set. He collected stray bits of matted fur and pushed them in the disposer, brushed his hands, and remade the bed. Tatha came dripping from the unit.

"I can't dry myself," she said ruefully. Jes accepted the towel and passed it over her soft fur, and when she gave him the name of an antibiotic, he picked it from the litter of drugs on the table and gave it to her. She refused a pain killer.

"You're being remarkably silent," she said, once back in bed. "Aren't you anxious to yell questions?"

"I'm not sure I want to know the answers," Jes said. "But I guess you'd better tell me what this is all about."

"Water?"

Jes brought her a cup, then sat at the table. Tatha stared into the cup.

"Santa Theresa," she said finally. "My name is Tatha Al'Okelough pre-Parian, which doesn't mean a thing to you. I'm Tatha, the second child of the clan Okelough, of the province of Parian. Parian's the fiefdom of clan Okelough; my parents rule it. It's a productive province, wealthy, influential. It bored me. I left fairly young to work as a jockey at the local Sal. It was the only job they'd let me have, family or no. And when I found, after a couple of years, that they'd no intention of letting me move up to taujockey and ride the ships, I went home. My clan took me back. I suppose they were used to me, by then. They sent me off to Egliesa, the capital, to university. That bored me too, and I spiced things up. Extracurricular activities. *Tempus est jocondum.* The last prank went sour, my lover died, I became very unwelcome on Santa Theresa. My father

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gave me what little money he could, and some jewelry that was to come to me anyway. And he told me to get off Santa Theresa and not come back." She paused. "I had something of my own by then, too. The money was enough to buy passage to Priory, the only jobs were on the Station. When I came here they took what my father had given me, and what I had myself, and I can't leave until I get it back."

She stopped, drank some water, and sat staring into the cup. Her eyes were downcast and Jes could not read her expression.

"Go on," he said.

She went on, without looking up. She had deduced that Maigret knew the location of the confiscated goods, and Tatha had set herself, over the past months, to follow Maigret, trying to learn where the hiding place might be. When she learned that Parallax too was interested, her search quickened, became a complex game of following the Parallax agent while trying not to be followed herself; for if Parallax learned the location, and captured it, Tatha would lose all chance of regaining that which was hers. Last night, in the cool fastness of Maigret's deserted office, Tatha had learned the location of her possessions. The Parallax agent had found her there and tried to kill her.

"He had the benefit of surprise, and I think he damaged me more than I damaged him," she said with regret. "A sorry blow to the ego. And I came here."

"And now that I've patched you up, you can march off and rescue your jewels," Jes said curtly.

Tatha shook her head. "I know where they are, but not where that is."

"And you want me to help you get it." Jes stood, kicking the chair aside, and shoved his hands angrily into his pockets. "Doesn't it strike you that all this is a lot of trouble for a bunch of jewelry? You can leave with me, I'll take you. And you can make up your loss. It's not as important as your freedom, is it?"

"I think it is. It's not easily replaceable, you know."

"Of all the cross-grained, idiotic, bull-headed, greedy nonsense," Jes shouted. "You can risk your own ass for a bunch of glitter, but I'm damned if I'll let you risk mine."

Tatha sipped from the cup. "I assume you tried to get another jockey. And I assume they told you to be happy with what you had."

Jes stood at the edge of the bed and glared at her. "I don't like being bullied, and I don't like being coerced."

"Then how about moral blackmail?" she replied. "Our shadow is a Parallax agent, and what I know, he knows. If he finds the location of the place before I do, or before Gensco is warned, he'll have the leverage he needs for the takeover."

"I don't care. Gensco and Parallax deserve each other. All I want is to get the hell out of here, and soon."

Tatha didn't look up. "The hiding

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place is in the cold creche. And we've found out where the cold creche is."

Jes put his hand on the table. By all the criteria he and Tatha had discussed, that day in the repairs bay, the cold creche was the perfect lever.

"Not fair," he said. "Oh, that's totally dirty, Tatha. I'm not responsible for those children." Tatha didn't reply. "Besides, how could my helping you help them? Why don't you just tell Gensco? Take the commiter, call Maigret, and tell her. Let Gensco handle it."

"If Gensco sets up a quickwatch on the creche, it will be impossible for me to get in. And they won't give me what's mine as thanks for uncovering Parallax, either." She balanced the cup on her lap. "Gensco won't be told until I've what I want, and am on my way out of the system."

"Moral blackmail," Jes said with revulsion. "You're immune to it, aren't you? Your heap of treasure is far more important than those lives."

"The children won't suffer. They're in stasis, they'll never know what hit them."

"Holy Mother, you're a bitch."

"Perhaps. Help me, and I'll fix your ship."

Jes made a sharp gesture. "What makes you think the agent isn't there already? It's been seven hours since you came here."

"Because he's busy looking for me. To kill me. I'm as much a threat to him as he is to me, and until he offs me, he can't do anything else." She looked up. "The cold creche is in an orbiting satellite. There are fifty-eight of them. I don't know which is the right one, but I think that, by now, the agent does. I wiped the bank of tapes in the office before the fight, so Gensco knows we found something, but they don't know what. And they'll soon know for sure that I was one of the finders."

"Why?"

"Because Maigret's pretty office is fairly well splattered with my blood. All they have to do is type it — the differences are subtle, but conclusive. And there's only one Theresan on the Station."

Jes stared at her. Both Parallax and Gensco were following her, and the trail led directly to his cabin and to himself.

"There's another choice," he said. "I could call Maigret myself, tell her what you've been doing, what condition you're in. If necessary, I could even hurt you."

"The moment Parallax knows that Gensco's on to him, he'll head for the creche immediately, without waiting to finish with me. And you could hurt me, if necessary." She lay still, the bandage thick and stark on her shoulder, her arm strapped tightly to her waist under her full breasts. She looked totally unafraid.

"All right," Jes said angrily. "Fix my ship and I'll get you to the cold creche. I'll even take you out of Priory.

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And then I never want to see you again."

"Why is it," Tatha murmured, "that people keep saying that to me?" She swung her legs out of the bed and stood carefully. "You'd best order something for me to wear, tauCaptain. And a jacket or cloak to cover the shoulder. We've another four hours, I'd guess, before things get hot."

Jes, on his way to the clensor to retrieve his Certificate, stopped. "Four hours? How are you going to get my leads plate in four hours?"

"I had your plate yesterday, I stole it from another bay before I went into Gem Sphere. And it's four hours before any blood tests come up conclusive, if they haven't screwed things up. We haven't much time."

When the suit arrived, Jes ungently helped her put it on. With a short jacket covering her sling and Jes' sack cradled in her good arm, and her hair covered by a hood, she led the way to the repairs bay.

She couldn't climb the rope to the sloop. So Jes lowered the ship to within a few meters of the floor of the bay. She sat on the hull giving directions while Jes soldered and positioned and sealed, and she ran the checks with professional ease. Two and a half hours after they began, the job was finished. Tatha reached for Jes' chronometer, then suddenly flicked off the pocketlight. Jes listened intently.

The noise was slight but definite. Someone, walking through the far side of the bay, knocked against a piece of loose metal. Tatha silently collected her tools and dropped them into her pouch, touched Jes, and slid down the hull of the sloop. When Jes landed beside her, she pulled his head down and whispered, her lips brushing his ear.

"Parallax. I have to take care of him, find out where the creche satellite is." She put her fingers over his mouth. "Go inside. If I'm not back in an hour, get out of Priory, fast." She disappeared into the darkness of the repairs bay. Jes hesitated, then slid into the darkness after her.

Another clink of metal sounded from the far side of the bay. The agent was either inept, which Jes doubted, or wounded, which was possible, or as eager to find Tatha as she was to find him, and deliberately let her spot his location. Jes turned and crept in the direction of the sound.

Another scrape of sound, closer this time. Jes paused, wondering if the agent was armed. The glow from the commiter bank lit the space before him. He stepped back from the light, and someone grabbed him efficiently and painfully, and locked a hard, unfurred arm around his neck.

Jes had fought in the crowded back alleys of MarketPort, and his response was smooth and immediate. In two movements he was free of the hold and attacking. His assailant made a small, surprised noise before silencing into battle.

Jes never thought while fighting.

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His movements were economical, ingrained, and dictated on a level above that of conscious thought. He judged moves, circled, retreated, engaged with sudden ferocity. The agent carried a knife; small, silent, ancient, and efficient. Jes feinted, reversed, and kicked the knife from the agent's hand. Within the intensity of the movement he was aware of Tatha poised by the commiter, her good arm upraised, hand hard and flat. Jes edged his opponent around until the agent's back was to the Theresan, and unexpectedly shoved him backwards. Tatha brought her arm down efficiently across the agent's neck, and the man staggered. Then Jes had him in a firm grip, pinned to the dirty floor of the bay, and Tatha stood above them both.

"You fight as dirty as I do," she said to Jes and knelt beside the agent.

"Gensco knows," the agent said. "Or will." His voice was surprisingly pleasant, despite the harshness of his breathing. "Take me with you. I'll let you take what you want, and you can leave me there."

"No," Tatha said. "Tell me where the creche is."

The agent shook his head.

"Tatha, listen to him. It makes sense."

She rocked back on her heels, looking at Jes. "Our friend here said something very interesting yesterday, before he knifed me."

Jes felt the muscles below him tense, and he shifted his grip. The agent went limp again.

"He said," Tatha continued calmly, "'Where's your friend from Aerie?' Does that mean anything to you?"

"Idiot,' the agent said. "He doesn't mean anything to you. I'd have bought him from you—" he gasped as Tatha ran a claw down his leg.

"Where is it?" she said.

"I'm not going to tell you," the agent said in his pleasant voice.

"I think I owe you something," Tatha replied, and her voice was not pleasant at all.

Neither was what followed. Jes held on and turned his face away, bracing his hands against the movement between them, trying not to listen as the agent's breath caught, moaned, sobbed.

"Tatha," Jes muttered, but she ignored him. The agent's back arched, he said a string of numbers and went limp. Jes looked. Even one-handed, Tatha was remarkably efficient.

"Is he dead?"

"No." Tatha wiped her claws on her pants leg. When she looked at Jes her eyes were wide and clear and cold. "Do you want to do that?"

"God, Tatha."

"Then I will." She unsheathed her claws again.

"No!" Jes stood, breathing unevenly. "No. I'll do it."

Tatha looked at him, considering. The agent moaned. Without changing her expression, Tatha bent down and sliced open his throat. "Come along,

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captain," she said. "We haven't much time."

Jes lingered a moment longer, still in shock, then ran after Tatha.

She leaped into the sloop ahead of him and settled in the navigator's web. He locked the hatch, then stood behind her.

"Tatha—"

"I said, we haven't much time." She slipped her arm from the sling and swung it carefully back and forth. "I've programmed your navigator. The creche is about an hour from here, nearing the northern pole. I don't think you should wait for take-off clearance."

Jes webbed himself in, fighting nausea, and flicked through a first check before warming the engines. As soon as the tattletales turned green, he lifted the sloop over the dead ships in the bay. The cables which held it snapped and fell free. Tatha leaned in front of him and did something with the call beam, and the gates of the first airlock swung open.

"They'll track us, but I've set your identity beamer to a standard Gensco code. They won't bother us until we approach the creche. We'll have to move fast, then." Tatha fell uncharacteristically silent. Jes looked at her; she swung her arm back and forth, her forehead creased. The bloodstains on her thigh dried and darkened. He turned back to his screens.

The tracking screen glittered with a multitude of points, Tatha rotated her shoulder and made a small noise. The tattletales for the new leads plate were comfortingly steady; the pressure in the ship was constant. The rind of Gensco station passed below, monotonously irregular. Tatha kept working her arm. A brittle, tense silence filled the sloop's small bridge. Jes relaxed his shoulders and wondered if this howling silence would last until he had finally deposited Tatha and her precious fortune on some distant planet. His hands ached, remembering the agent's body twisting between them. He wished that she would at least hum, and it was as much to silence the running of his memory as to break the silence that he finally spoke.

"What will happen to Tammas?" he said, peering at the tracking screen.

"Nothing. He'll pour beer and cook stew until he dies, or until The Lab decides its time to fight again. Then either someone will remember to come get him, or Gensco will kill him."

"He knows this?"

"He knows it." Her voice was without expression. The dreadful silence threatened to fall again.

"And Min?"

"Your bedmate? She's a Labber. She'll carry her cargo back to the Lab and spend time until the next run planning warfare. If she's lucky, she'll live to see her old age."

"You don't care about any of them, do you?"

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"Why should I? I didn't ask to be part of their lives, or part of their problems." She swung her arm in wider arcs.

"Why don't you take a pain killer?"

"Later."

He bit back a rude comment and watched his screens. Better silence than this abrupt, abrasive conversation.

"You wouldn't have killed him," Tatha said. Jes tightened his grip on the thrust slide, and the ship spurted forward. He carefully eased it back to cruising speed.

"You didn't expect me to, did you?"

"I was hoping," she said conversationally. "Do you know what would have happened to him, if I'd left you to it?"

"He'd still be dead. Your session with him was more than enough."

"If Gensco had him, and they probably would, they'd have patched him together enough to get him to talk, and then killed him far more unpleasantly than I did." She let that sink in, then said, "Be grateful for my bloodthirsty instincts, captain. Because if Gensco had him, and he talked, we'd be met with fire when we approach the creche. We'd be killed. And that, I think, is a fairly high price to pay for a misplaced humanitarian gesture."

Jes turned to her, shaking with anger. "You are a blood thirsty, inhuman, soulless bitch."

"Oh, come. You refused to kill a man who would have taken you and, presumably, used you against your own people, for evil ends. And with no more concern than you think I've shown toward the Labbers. I'm not an inhuman bitch, tauCaptain. I'm a predator. And what does that make you?"

She rose and paced about the bridge. Jes, unable to think of a reply of sufficient power, turned his back on her. He remembered that he'd once found her attractive, and his stomach turned again. After a while, she started humming.

"What in hell is that tune?" he demanded.

She came out of his cabin and walked along the supply racks, peering into them. "It's a love song, tauCaptain. An old one.

Western wind, when wilt thou blow
The small rain down can rain?
Christ, that my love were in my arms,
And I in my bed again."

The words were not in Standard, and Jes did not understand them.

"Pre-war Terran lit was the most useless major they offered at Egliesa," she said. "So I took it."

"I'm not surprised."

"Oh, and I loved it, tauCaptain. Not all my urges are black and complicated." She found an insulation sheet and carry pack, and was busy stuffing one into the other with one hand. She managed to do it gracefully. Jes looked to his board again.

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There were fewer blips on the tracking screen now. Jes checked the bridge chronometer.

"We're approaching the pole," he said.

Tatha tucked her carry pack under her seat and webbed herself in again. "It's a Beta-class satellite, probably with an open space landing grid, probably with at least three alarm buggies. Following a steady course, and they ought to be at four down, twelve across relative to the pole. Priory warehouse markings, look for three letters, three numbers, two letters, one number. They should have a standard codebeam." She stared at the tracking screen. "If they've changed orbit, we're lost."

Jes spotted three likely blips on the screen and flashed code demands to them. One was an inbound freighter, another was a hulk. The third answered in the proper letter and number sequence. Jes slid his ship into a new heading and approached.

"We don't want the main grid," Tatha said. "It's probably watched. Tuck around the side."

As he did so, the commiter beeped urgently. Tatha reached over his shoulder and turned it off. She touched the vision screen. "There. That's perfect."

It was a small grid, almost invisible under the satellite's markings. Jes dropped the sloop and felt the clamps lock in, then Tatha was out of her seat and sliding into the harness of a Barre suit. She slung her carry pack on her back and her toolcase about her waist before activating the suit's field. Jes stood while she walked to the airlock and slammed the hatch behind her. With a helpless oath, he grabbed a second Barre harness, pulled a handlance from its hiding place below the control board, and followed her out of the ship.

The field of her suit glimmered in the starlight. Jes followed the shimmer of it and found her kneeling by a thick metal hatch. She leaned forward until the suit's field covered the locking area, then began probing with her tools. Jes looked up and around, but nothing moved in the cold silence.

The hatch swung open. They moved inside and clamped the outer door shut. The airlock cycled through, and they stepped into a corridor.

The corridor was lit only by direction signs. Tatha moved down it without hesitation. Jes drew the handlance and followed, peering around him. The silence unnerved him.

Tatha hesitated at a branching of the corridor and took two steps down one hall. Nothing happened. She turned and took the other hall, and alarms shrieked, filling the corridor with noise and flashing lights. Tatha ran and Jes hurried behind her. At a second corridor she again took the path of least quiet.

The corridor was lined with doors. Tatha opened them quickly, until one resisted her hand. She probed the lock,

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and the door opened with a further blast of alarms. Jes stood in the open doorway while Tatha raced down the rows of locked cabinets, peering at the markings on the doors. Jes was unable to make out the words. Then Tatha stopped, read a label again, and broke the lock on the door. She pulled out a plain grey cylinder, closed off the wires leading to it, and wrapped it in an insulation sheet. The cylinder filled her arms. She ran back into the corridor, with Jes at her heels.

People appeared around the far bend; Jes could hear their voices shouting over the sound of the alarms. Tatha glanced back at Jes. He ran ahead of her and pointed the handlance. A traceburn appeared on the floor before the pursuers, and they jumped back. Tatha dodged into a flashing corridor, and Jes spun to follow.

He didn't understand why the guards weren't armed, until he remembered that they were probably in the area of the cold creche itself, and that a mis-aimed bolt would puncture the walls and kill the frozen children. The pursuers appeared at the far end of the hall. Jes waved the lance at them menacingly and they faded back. He saw medical smocks among them — not guards, then, but staff. He ran faster, afraid that if they didn't reach the lock soon, he'd have to kill someone.

The lock's codeplate glowed scarlet; it had been automatically locked when the alarms went off. Tatha pushed a door open and glanced at Jes. Within the room were the pumps and tubing and regulators that maintained the creches, and he nodded. She put her cylinder on the floor by the airlock and fumbled with her tools. When the pursuers appeared, Jes aimed his lance into the regulator room and waited. They stopped and made supplicating gestures; their words were lost in the howling of alarms. Jes kept his face stiff, and his stomach turned.

Tatha threw her tools down, pulled open the airlock door, and ran inside. Jes followed, grabbed the door, and slammed it shut, throwing the emergency lock on the inside. The outer door opened, and he took a moment to prop it open before following Tatha to the sloop. The inner door would not open with the outer door unsealed; perhaps they had bought a little time.

They slid into the webbing without removing the Barre harnesses.

"Go," Tatha said urgently. "Go, go go!"

Jes went. The sloop shuddered and flung itself away from the satellite, and as soon as its flight smoothed, Tatha was out of the seat, the cylinder in her arms, and heading for Jes' cabin. He leaped up, grabbed her wounded shoulder, and turned her around. She almost dropped the cylinder, and Jes grabbed it from her.

"You call Gensco. That was the deal, remember?"

"For God's sake." She reached for

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the cylinder. He held it away from her. "Give it to me," she said desperately.

Jes shook his head. "You call now, or I'll jettison this. I swear it."

Tatha grabbed the commiter mike, punched the all-bands transmitter, sent her message twice, and banged the mike down on the control board. She grabbed the cylinder from Jes and ran into the cabin. The bolt snicked shut behind her.

Jes turned to the commiter. Maigret's voice cut across the shouting; she ordered quickguards and seals around the cold creche, and sent out flights of interceptors. But the tausloop had been built for speed, and Jes pushed her to her limits. The interceptors dropped further and further behind. The sloop's navigational computer locked into the grab's coordinates. And when the Grabmaster's face, puffy with sleep, appeared on the screen, Jes demanded grab clearance before the 'master had a chance to talk.

"Why all the hurry, dear?" the 'master said. "Surely you've a moment to chat."

"I don't have a moment for anything," Jes said nastily. "I'm interested in getting the hell out of this fucking sector, forgetting it exists, and not hearing another word out of you or anyone else in Priory from now until doomsday. Do I have my clearance?"

"Oh, dear. You were impolite down there, weren't you? And after all my warnings. The commiters have been simply frantic for the past hour. Well, you can't blame others for your own lack of manners, my dear. Yes, yes, don't carry on so. It's not a Federation complaint they have against you. So my hands are tied. Pity. You have your clearance, sweetling. Bye." The 'master signed off in a flutter of jewels and fingers, and Jes dropped the sloop into the embrace of the coils.

He'd take her to MarketPort and dump her there, he decided. And he'd tell her, if she ever came out of his cabin. They had been in tau for three hours and the door remained bolted; by putting his ear against it, he could hear her moving about within the cabin, and the sharp clatter of metal on metal. No singing, no humming, no quick spill of words. He pounded on the door, but she didn't answer, and eventually he returned to the control board and slumped before it, thinking angry thoughts.

Half an hour later, the gauges on the power grid jumped to full, and stayed there. Jes' stomach felt cold. He ran through every tattletale on the board, then through every sensor, but found nothing. The drain remained high. Cursing, he strode through the ship, checking everything manually, and still could not find the drain. He beat on the cabin door.

"Tatha! Come out of there! Something's broken again."

She didn't answer. He put his ear to the door. The metallic sounds were

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gone; now he heard her voice indistinctly. It sounded as though she were pleading; then the words became melody, and the melody became words.

"Tatha! Damn it, get your ass out of there!"

She ignored him. Suddenly suspicious, he ran to the board and retraced the drain. It stemmed from his cabin. Maliciously, he pounded the cut-off switch, and the grid didn't so much as twitch — she must have opened the paneling and by-passed the cut-off. He cursed and made a series of calculations. If she kept up the drain, they wouldn't have the power to make MarketPort. He fetched a laser and prepared to cut through the cabin door.

Then, as suddenly as it had risen, the grid dropped to normal again. Jes put his ear to the door and heard movement, then total silence. Setting his jaw, he activated the laser and sliced through the door.

The cabin was a catastrophe. Panels along one side had been ripped open, and wires trailed from the conduits across the floor. The desk and table were invisible under a complicated arrangement of wires and resistors, all created from the ruins of the wall conduits. He recognized component parts of his tape scanner, decorating the edges of the cylinder that Tatha had stolen from the cold creche. The cylinder itself was open along the top. The room was unbearably warm.

He turned to the rest of the room and found Tatha. She lay sideways in the wide hammock, her eyes closed, blood seeping from her wounded shoulder. The fur along her arms was singed; her Barre harness and suit had disappeared. Held close to her body, cradled in her arms, a small, grey-furred infant sucked at her breast.

Jes lowered the laser and leaned against the door, staring. "Something of my own," she had said. "Not easily replaceable." "My lover died." The infant's tiny hand curled in the fur of her breast.

Of course, she would not have told him. For he would have mounted a holy war, and they would all have died. The child first. Gensco policy. He pulled himself away from the wall, walked to the hammock, and looked down at Tatha and her jewel. A trickle of blood touched the small fingers, and Jes cleaned them gently with his fingertips. Tatha opened her eyes and looked at him without expression.

"I think," Jes said unevenly, "that I'd better tend your shoulder again."

Tatha closed her eyes, and the ghost of a smile played about her lips.

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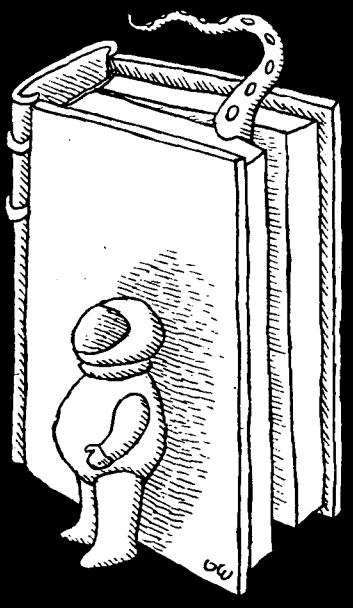
Books

JOHN CLUTE



John Crowley, *Engine Summer*, Doubleday, $7.95.

Suzette Haden Elgin, *Star-Anchored, Star-Angered*, Doubleday, $7.95.

Terry Carr (editor), *The Best Science Fiction of the Year no. 8*, Ballantine/Del Rey, $2.25.

George Zebrowski, *Macrolife*, Harpers, $12.95.

Time does pass. After twelve months of novels that stuck to your shoes like dwagon-dew, 1979 has been a year it was a pleasure to review books in, mostly. Arthur C. Clarke and Frederik Pohl and Thomas M. Disch and some others have put out titles near the top of their various bents, and, in the sequels he apparently intends to produce, John Varley may manage to pull *Titan's* socks up a bit, if only in retrospect, though you do have to wonder — more and more his women protagonists are beginning to sound as though they came out of *recent* Heinlein, and the doting gigantism of *Titan* does seem to bring out an elephantiasic gormlessness to the way the story is actually told; but of that more later on, when we attempt to deal with George Zebrowski's *Macrolife*, a title which sounds like, and a book which has the texture of, a new brand of linoleum, battleship grey, dead permanent, though there is one thing that can be said immediately to its credit. No dragons.

And then there's John Crowley, au-

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thor of *The Deep* (1975) and *Beasts* (1976) and of nothing else, who has just published his finest novel to date, and in the dark close warmth of its imprisoning integrity one of the best novels yet to come out of the sf genre. The integrity of *Engine Summer* begins and ends with the title. At first glance a slightly irritating play on Indian summer, by novel's end it has become not only the meaning of the book but — complexly — the book itself, for ultimately we come to see that the very text of the book — the first-person narrative of its protagonist, Rush that Speaks — is precisely an engine summer.

Like *Beasts*, to which it is a kind of thematic sequel, *Engine Summer* is set in a post-holocaust America, though in this case so long after the event that pre-collapse humans are referred to as angels (but without approbation), and Indians have been so long forgotten that the glorious days of early autumn, during which much of the story takes place, are referred to as engine summer. Set in the midst of the long diffuse tedious terrifying collapse of technological Faustian man, *Beasts* is damagingly plotted around the kind of technophilic revanchist conspiracies that make up the narrative substance of far too many American sf novels about our Balkanized future after the roads fail. The America of *Engine Summer*, in contrast, seems to be a kind of paradise inhabited by a series of ecologically modest oral cultures deeply attuned to the natural world; there seems to be no alienation.

Born into the Palm cord of Little Belaire commune, Rush that Speaks grows up obsessed with the notion, entirely proper to his culture, of becoming a saint. In Little Belaire terms, a saint is an individual man or woman whose life is a tale of such transparency that others can hear the truth of the world through its telling, Painted Red, his mentor, tries to explain: Saints (she says)

> are saints not because of what they did, especially, but because in the telling of it, what they did became transparent, and your own life could be seen through it, illuminated... And in transparent life, the saints hoped that one day we might be free from death: not immortal, as the angels tried to become, but free from death, our lives transparent even as we live them: not through a means, you see, like ... truthful speaking, but transparent *in their circumstances:* so that instead of telling a story that makes a life transparent, we will ourselves be transparent, and not hear or remember a saint's life, but live it: live many lives in the moment between birth and dying.

In Little Belaire, an oral community the telling of whose dead saints' lives comprises the very warp and woof of all history and meaning, words are deeply important, and "truthful speaking" lies at the heart of those strings of narrative (or cords) that maintain social comity, for how else can the lives of the saints be seen through? As are all members of his particular cord, Rush

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that Speaks is an intensely dedicated truthful speaker, but for him to radiate that saintly transparency through which others can hear themselves be human, he must lead an exemplary life. He grows up longing to. *Engine Summer is* that longing. Is it exemplary?

After the girl he loves disappears one spring with the clan of roaming traders called Dr Boots' List, Rush eventually follows her into the outside world, which seems almost as pastoral as Little Belaire itself. He hibernates with Blink, a saint of no fixed cord; he treks southwards, coming across the List's home base, where he finds his love strangely transformed, impassive, translucent, seemingly unconscious of the passage of time, for when she receives once a year, as-do all members of the List, a "letter" from Dr Boots, the world begins afresh for her. He manages to receive a letter of his own; it turns out to an epiphany; a strange glowing ball from the time of the angels briefly possesses him, infusing him for a moment with his love's translucently inhuman acceptance of the unchanging garden of the world. But he is troubled in his heart. A letter from Dr Boots is more like a lobotomy than an infusion of sainthood. He has lost her.

So he has to leave. After further adventures, he discovers an angel-crafted silver hand, which the tales of the saints have always significantly linked with a glowing ball, one of several. Almost immediately, his dreams of angel cities in the sky are confirmed when a genuine angel, alerted by his discovery of the lost hand, parachutes down to him through the air, and the novel begins to close in on the deep pathos of its underlying premise. The angel, by name Mongolfier, explains to Rush that the hand is a device for the control of the glowing balls, which are themselves angel devices for the imprinting and subsequent replaying of entire personalities. Before humans had been recorded, however, experiments had been thought necessary, and the ball that had struck Dr Boots' List into timelessness, for instance, contained the personality of a cat named Boots. But now Mongolfier has an offer to make, that of immortality. The floating angel city desperately needs an exemplary human personality to remind its inhabitants of their original nature as the centuries pass. Mongolfier offers to imprint Rush that Speaks into a permanent glowing transparency. Though the human Rush that Speaks will himself live on, an aging mortal on a quest for sainthood, he will also have been transformed into a sentient playback in the heavens, and will remain in the heavens forever.

Engine Summer is of course that sentient record's longing tale; the frame of the book is a conversation between "Rush that Speaks" and a deeply moved listener, a conversation taking place 600 years after the events "he" relives, events which comprise his immediate life and memories and goals,

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even though he has all unknowingly repeated them 300 times. No matter how often told, however, this life and the words of its retelling remain paradigmatic. They are nothing but truth. They can be seen through. "Rush that Speaks" has become a radiance — a saint — through which generations of angels learn the meaning of themselves.

But for reasons the novel makes complexly and amply clear, the warm pastoral garden of a world so described is not an engine summer merely because, after all, a kind of engine is doing the job of re-creation; it is an engine summer because the world so lovingly described is precisely a contrivance of autumn, a dying Arcadia, for the cultures that make up this idyllic America are scattered and dwindling, and human fertility is only precariously maintained through limited supplies of an angel powder; and winter is nigh. 600 years on, *Engine Summer* is only a text. And that is its ultimate truth. Typically of Crowley, the final revelation of truth turns out to be a demonstration of control. As in all his work, peace and solace are no more than cat's-cradles in the fingers of a huge closing hand.

Rarely in sf (or elsewhere) will form and message cohabit as powerfully as they do in *Engine Summer;* what you run across far more frequently, in anything more ambitious than pure adventure or escape, will be a defensively philistine scattering of material, so that the whole leaks its parts. Take, for instance, Suzette Haden Elgin, who wrote three novels about a decade ago, stopped for a while, and has now returned (it is, all in all, a welcome return) with a fourth book about Coyote Jones, her intergalactic secret agent. *Star-Anchored, Star-Angered,* like its predecessors, boasts a good deal of razzmatazz, but simply cannot contain itself. Once again impertinent sloppy huggable Coyote — mind-deaf in a universe where telepathy is normal — hares off on a planet-changing mission for the Tri-Galactic Intelligence Service which employs him mainly for his immunity to thought-control and for his capacity to project coercive thoughts onto great masses of telepaths simultaneously. This time it seems that a female messiah-figure has cropped up on the planet Freeway, and is disrupting the rigid hierarchical faith that has up to now controlled the planet. Coyote's mission is unclear, and in the event he accomplishes very little, nor is he actually on stage for much of the novel, which as a consequence leaks anecdotes like a sieve; which can dampen your pleasure. Coyote's main accomplishment is to fall deeply under the influence of Drussa Silver, the new Messiah, who soon performs some genuine miracles and who, like the revolutionary divinity she is, sacrifices herself to the powers-that-be, which gain only a pyrrhic victory in killing her, as our grief-stricken protagonist is told by let-

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ter at novel's end; this letter also informs him — for he has signally failed to understand (or indeed *do*) anything up to this point — that he'd been sent to Freeway not to investigate a spurious sect but to help kill a god (his help was unnecessary). The Three Galaxies (he's told) have cultures based (like Italian cities) upon a continuing competitive disunity, and could not tolerate the unified universe Drussa's genuine divinity might well impose. Nevertheless (concludes the letter) *chances are* (though we're not to find out) that Drussa's faith will triumph, and that Coyote Jones's cartoon dingbat universe will become an ecumene.

In bits, Elgin is a sharp, intelligent, witty, interestingly speculative writer. She has depicted Freeway's conflicting cultures absorbingly, though through a confusing variety of points of view (rarely Coyote's). Coyote himself has a warm heart and a beard. The feminism underlying the story is cogent and quietly sustained. But none of it much matters. Nothing has any follow-through. Because she has paid vanishingly small attention (or so it must seem) to the actual prime task of creating a fictional shape to transmit her various themes (which include the effects of a divine being upon an entire Three Galaxies), and because her protagonist (who must have bored her silly) is no more than an emcee (generally shorn of notes), what we're left with is gossip. (Gab.)

* * *

Best sf of the year anthologies must be terribly hard for anyone to assemble with a straight face. Titles like Terry Carr's *The Best Science Fiction of the Year no. 8*, in their attempts to convey a sense of the newsworthy and the canonical at the same time, give off an air of somewhat decadent pixillation, though I doubt Mr. Carr could be accused of a lack of due sobriety in his performance of the task of selection, nor has he forgotten to include in Harlan Ellison (does he ever?). In fact the selection is extremely safe indeed. Most of the stories come from reliable (not to say canonical) sources; there are three from this magazine alone, and three from *Analog*. Included out should have been the Ellison, perhaps, as "Count the Clock that Tells the Time" is one of his lesser efforts, professional enough, but slightly padded, slightly absent-minded, couched in a confessional mode but the confession doesn't seem to be his. The title is great but (as he acknowledges) it's Shakespeare's, and it doesn't fit the story. But Ellison (as a name anyway) is a sign of establishment cloth, and the rest of the anthology follows suit, though John Varley's "The Barbie Murders" is a dim inconclusive question-begging word-spinner, and Thomas M. Disch's "The Man Who Had No Idea" is unaccountably genial and without formal bite, so that a potentially formidable idea gradually declines into doodle. Ian Watson's "The Very Slow Time Machine" is crushing-

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ly metaphysical, like a ziggurat, or Barrington Bayley; Gordon Eklund's "Vermeer's Window" manages not to be philistine about Vermeer; Gregory Benford and March Laidlaw's "A Hiss of Dragon" posits an interesting fake-dragon technology, but the story ends before it has properly begun. Fritz Leiber's "Black Glass" is one of the three best selections; a further installment in his series of confessionals about an elderly man haunted by alternate versions of America's destiny which infiltrate our current world and darken it, the story will benefit from association with its fellows, but has a crafted elegiac clarity in its own right. "The Morphology of the Kirkham Wreck" by Hilbert Schenck recounts, in a tone of intense reportorial objectivity, an episode of time manipulation under stress set in nineteenth century New England. Donald Kingsbury's "To Bring in the Steel" makes big business in the asteroid belt sound like something out of Richard Condon, but Richard Condon's strength lies in the animus he bears against the corporate world, and Kingsbury is a booster; nevertheless the story is nifty and bigger than life and you can get off on it. And that's about it; the anthology gives off a sense of time being bided in the pantheon, or maybe even time being bided by Terry Carr. Maybe there was nothing else better to print, but the narrowness of the base for selection, with six magazines or anthologies providing the entire contents, and the familiarity of most of the authors, do give rise to a desperate (though not serious) suspicion.

We come to *Macrolife*, big, dense, terribly illustrated, dumb. And if George Zebrowski is as humorless as the prose he fills the marmoreal solitude of this book with, then he's not much of a smiler. *Macrolife* — the title comes from Dandridge Cole's vision of vast artificial communities whose cells would be "individual human beings, plants, animals, and machines" — is certainly nothing if not serious. And because it deals with important (not to say gigantic) issues, viz. humanity's future as we outgrow the planet of our origin, then perhaps the book *should* be inflexibly serious and didactic, deadpan, aspiring, solemn, sanctimonious, deceased. Pooh.

No way. It doesn't wash. If a novel is going to display a high-toned Stapledonian seriousness about the next trillion years or so, there simply cannot be any pratfalls — humor yes, unconscious slapstick no — and so there can be no excuse for a plot as lamebrained and off the point as the one Zebrowski has riddled his vision with. Although the book is supposed to be about the macrolife interstellar "maturity" of mankind after we have left mere planets far behind us and have become cellular units in a higher transhuman consciousness housed mainly in hollowed-out asteroids and the like, most of the actual text is stupefyingly devoted to

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the misadventures of members of the Bulero family who, like the Beverly Hillbillies, are very rich, very unintelligent, and everywhere. Long ago the first Bulero had invented bulerite, a magical material that has become essential to all human technology and architecture on Earth by 2021, when the novel begins with a great catastrophe. Bulerite is beginning to dissolve all over Earth and civilization is ending. The Bulero clan leaves Earth for a hollowed-out asteroid they had nothing to do with constructing. The dissolved bulerite begins to coalesce. Soon the planet looks like the egg of an orc. And that's that: Earth dies to get the Buleros into space, and we can forget all about bulerite. Zebrowski certainly does. A thousand years passes in the twinkling of an eye, but there are still Buleros around. Young John Bulero — clone of the dullest of the earlier Buleros — goes native on an alien planet in a sulk because he doesn't like his macrolife asteroid, and — because he is thick-witted and utterly humorless — manages utterly to destroy the culture he has visited himself upon. This takes up much of the remainder of the book. Then many billions of years pass. John Bulero — who else — is reconstructed from the elevated mass-mind of macrolife to save the universe by exercising his indomitable human will and guiding all the assembled macrolife containers through the ultimate black hole that ends our universe and into the next cycle. He is successful of course. The novel ends with a solemn peroration about macrolife.

The bulerite catastrophe and the John Bulero pratfalls are both narrated through a haze of extraordinarily repetitive propaganda for macrolife (the word itself must appear at least 5000 times). Unfortunately, nothing in the novel works to dramatize these arguments, nor is Zebrowski capable of envisioning his higher plane of existence in terms that bring us much past 1960. When, for instance, he describes his hollowed-out asteroids, he makes them resemble nothing more (or less) than an enclosed shopping mall, complete with Muzak; he may well *like* enclosed shopping malls, but at a time when John Varley and others have developed a language for describing gigantic artifacts huge in scale and involvingly complex in detail, the enclosed shopping mall is hardly an exhilarating model for elevated speculation about the shape of our future. It's what you might call an Eisenhower high. Right. Macrolife would have been heaven for Ike.

A word to the wise. Gregory Benford's apparently adulatory dustjacket blurb is not quite what it seems. Out of an extended critique of the manuscript of *Macrolife*, the publisher's copywriters have excerpted several sentences of high praise. However, each one of these sentences has been tampered with, so be warned.

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"...anyhow, if I were you, I'd take every precaution, Mr. Steele."

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This is a political story — and a strong one — though the author tells us that "a South African (white) I know read this and told me that I understated the brutality." Mr. Yermakov has a new novel, THE SURROGATE MOUTH, scheduled for publication soon from Berkley.

Far Removed From the Scene of the Crime

BY
NICHOLAS YERMAKOV

In a dark room on Robben Island, just off the coast of Capetown, a man with no name hung manacled from the ceiling, receiving electric shocks in his genitals. Sweat streamed from his pores, every one of which was open and screaming. His ebony face was contorted as the pain coursed through him and blood trickled from the corner of his mouth. He had bitten through his tongue.

"Tough old *kaffir*, aren't you, one eighty-seven?" said the by now familiar voice of his tormentor, speaking from somewhere back in the darkness. It was an Afrikaner voice, rather droll and not unpleasant. "Be smart, *kaffir*, make the right decision. Talk to me. Tell me what I want to know and I'll send the nasty man away."

There was no reply. The nasty man grinned and closed the contact. The power flowed. One eighty-seven bucked in the air like a hooked trout breaking surface.

"Sing, *kaffir!*" called the voice. "Da, da, da, da, da, da, dada, da, da, da, *wir leben Südwest!*"

Eyes bulging, one eighty-seven thrashed twice more and fainted. The only sound in the darkened room was that of the rope creaking as the manacled man slowly swung back and forth, suspended in midair.

"Bloody hell," muttered Van Owen. "Take him down."

The nasty man and another, also in uniform, unfastened the rope from its hook, and one eighty-seven dropped like a stone to the floor.

"Gently, now, *gent*-ly," cautioned Van Owen. "I wouldn't want the bastard to crack his skull before I'm through with him."

The others picked him up, one by the hands, one by the feet, swinging

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him slightly. They tossed him in the general direction of what passed for a cot, propped up in the corner of the room. One eighty-seven hit the wall and bounced down onto the bedding.

"That's your 'free Namibia' for you!" snarled the nasty man.

"Cool out, sergeant, cool out," said Van Owen, lighting up an American cigarette, a Lucky Strike. "This isn't personal, you know. Just do your job."

The sergeant looked as if he was about to say something, but one look at Van Owen's impassive face stopped him. "Yes, sir," he muttered, managing something that looked vaguely like a salute, then leaving the room along with his companion.

Van Owen, alone in the cell with the unconscious man, rose to his feet and crossed the floor; standing by the cot, he looked down at the senseless black man.

"Who are you, one eighty-seven?" he asked softly. "Who in bloody hell are you?"

They called him by a number. The number stamped upon the plastic bracelet welded to his wrist, just like the ones worn by all the other workers. Workers who broke their backs doing the most menial of labor, never to be allowed to attain the rank of supervisor, never to be able to leave their jobs without fear of corporal punishment ... or worse. Workers who were paid in meager quantities of sugar, fat and flour, a diet of which was all they had to sustain their families. Workers who were always "on call." Workers who lived to an average age of thirty-one years only to be buried in the dirt with nothing to mark their final resting place except a somewhat tombstone-shaped board bearing the number on their bracelets. Workers who lived and died in the searing sunlight of Namibia. Southwest Africa. Workers who were black.

They had caught him at a rally. He had been the one with the bullhorn. A lot were killed, the rest were scattered. The flags and placards with the SWAPO slogans had been trampled in the dirt. His "name" was one eighty-seven. Only, it wasn't. One eighty-seven was dead. His employer had remembered him very well. They had had to shoot him, for whatever reason, Van Owen did not recall. The man they had was someone else. A special someone else.

They had loaded him, along with the others, into a pickup truck, the bed of which was enclosed with wood and steel mesh; then they drove him to the jail. He had been beaten, many times. He had been questioned, many times. They had starved him, tortured him, and threatened him with death. And, despite all that, one eighty-seven had not said one single, solitary word since that day when they knocked the bullhorn away from his mouth, chipping several teeth in the process. Not one word.

Now, he was in the prison on Rob-

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ben Island, just off the coast of Capetown. Far away, far removed from the scene of the crime. Yes, he was a special man.

"You're mine, one eighty-seven," said Van Owen. "You're all mine. And, by God, I'm going to crack you."

Van Owen had been many things in his life. Now, he was a mercenary, on and off. Capetown was his home, his place of birth. Southwest was *his* land, *his* country. Without them, the *kaffirs* were nothing. *They* had brought the industry. *They* had brought the organization, the progress, the government. Van Owen would see all the blacks in hell before he succumbed to their majority rule. SWAPO was a threat, but to him, it didn't seem to be much of a threat. A slight annoyance. The Southwest Africa People's Organization, indeed. Something invented by the United Nations. A bunch of meddlesome foreigners. They weren't much of a threat, either. A lot of talk, a lot of noise, but who cared, really? Van Owen had been to America, to New York. His work took him many places. Most New Yorkers didn't even know the difference between the General Assembly and the Security Council. To them, all the United Nations stood for was something that was responsible for all the little children with the orange canisters who collected dimes and quarters on Halloween for UNICEF. No, the UN wasn't much of a threat. But men like one eighty-seven, if there were more such as he, they were very much a threat, indeed.

Van Owen told himself he did not hate the man. After all, it was not his job to hate. And Van Owen was only doing his job. Was only doing what was right. It was nothing personal. Not really.

"Who are you, *kaffir?*" he asked the prostrate form. "Where did you come from? Who are your friends?" He squatted down next to the cot, close to the black man's ear. "When you come around, we'll talk again, you and I. We're going to be good friends, *kaffir*. We'll tell each other all our secrets."

He stood up and flicked his cigarette into a corner of the room, where it lay smoking. He slapped his hand against his thigh, absently.

"Rest well, one eighty-seven. Rest well." He brushed his thick blond hair away from his eyes and turned to leave the room. The door was open. On the other side of the door was a darkened room. In the corner of the darkened room, against the wall, stood a makeshift cot. On the cot, face turned towards the wall, lay a man.

Van Owen frowned. "What the hell...."

He entered the other room. The room where, moments before, there had been a hall.

"Sergeant?"

There was no response. Van Owen slowly approached the cot. He gazed upon the unconscious form of one eighty-seven. He turned around and looked through the door through

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which he came. There was a darkened room. With a cot. And a man lying on that cot, face turned towards the wall....

He spun around, again. Reaching out, he grabbed the unconscious man by the shoulder and turned him over. The man flopped over, heavily, like dead weight, onto his back. His eyes were closed and bruised. His face was puffy, battered from numerous beatings. His neck was scar-crossed. There was blood on his lips and chin, already drying. His mouth was open and several teeth were chipped and others missing.

Van Owen ran through the door and into the room on the other side. He raced over to the cot. Van Owen froze in his tracks, stopped as if he had hit a wall. The black man on the cot was lying on his back, his face a symphony of violence, his mouth hanging open, displaying cracked and missing teeth. Van Owen spun around again. The view through the doorway, into the other room, was identical. He ran to the door and slammed it shut, then rubbed his eyes and slapped his face several times.

"Sergeant! *Gerhardt!*"

His voice, in the room, sounded hollow. He opened the door, only to slam it shut once again. What was on the other side had not changed.

"Holy Mother of God," he whispered. "I must be losing my bleedin' marbles!"

Steady, boy, he thought. Steady. It's only the strain, that's all. Only the strain. You've been at this thing for hours now, you must be more tired than you thought. These things never bothered you before. Cool out, now. Breathe easy.

He inhaled and exhaled, deeply, several times. He held his hands out before him. They were shaking, slightly. Damn. The nerves. The nerves were going. The bastard's getting to you, son, he thought. All this time, not one single word, it's bound to shake you up a bit. He's just another *kaffir*, that's all. A bit more stubborn, perhaps, but no different from any of the others. It's late. Go home, now, get some sleep. Tomorrow is another day.

Van Owen counted ten, slowly. He turned around and put his hand on the doorknob. And found that he couldn't summon up the nerve to turn it. He tried to force his mind to order his hand to open the door. His forearm shook with the effort, the muscles standing out, the knuckles of his fingers white. The doorknob moved, slightly. He could not bring himself to open it.

"Gerhaardt!" he screamed.

There was no answer. He tore his hand away from the doorknob and smashed his fist into the wood. The skin on his knuckles broke. *"Damn!"*

Cradling his bleeding fist in his other hand, Van Owen staggered over to the cot and kicked it, savagely.

"Wake up, you bloody bastard! *Wake up!*"

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Van Owen backed away from the crumpled man, who had begun stirring slightly. His blue eyes were wild as they stared from the prisoner to the door. Jesus Christ, Van Owen, he thought to himself, get a grip on yourself. You're going loony. He ground his fists into his forehead, shaking like a stunned bull. His legs were unsteady.

One eighty-seven slowly, painfully, managed to lift part of his upper body off the floor. He squinted at Van Owen through swollen eyelids. One hand wandered, jerkily, to the spot on his ribs where Van Owen had booted him.

"On your feet!"

One eighty-seven dragged himself to a sitting position. He was not a big man. Thin. Bony. Going bald. He could have been either twenty-five or sixty. His ravaged tongue poked out of his mouth and licked at his split lips.

"Well," he said, in a deep African voice, "If it isn't my old friend, Mr. Van Owen. And how are you this fine day?" He labored to get the words out, breathing deeply.

"So," sneered Van Owen, "you can talk, after all, you black son of a bitch. You know who I am, do you?"

"You are," one eighty-seven paused, "*Mister* Van Owen."

"I'll mister you, by God. Open that door!"

The black man stared at him. "I take it, I am free to go, then?"

"OPEN THE BLOODY DOOR!"

The scream almost ripped Van Owen's vocal chords asunder. He stood there, holding his damaged fist, shoulders rising and falling with each breath. One eighty-seven looked at him, meeting his gaze. Then, his face like a death mask, he smiled.

"You open it, white man."

Van Owen leapt forward and kicked one eighty-seven full force in the face. Blood spurted onto his combat boot. Van Owen's face was ugly. It was the face of a man who had killed. And would kill again.

One eighty-seven coughed and hacked, spit blood, and tried several times, unsuccessfully, to use his arms to prop himself back up. Failing in this, he turned over on his back and stared at his inquisitor. A large piece of bone protruded from a break in the skin on his nose. He looked barely human.

"You are strong, man. Very strong." He coughed and wheezed. "Why don't you kill me and get it over with?"

"You'd like that, wouldn't you," Van Owen said with quiet malice. "I won't give you that satisfaction. You'll wish you *were* dead when I get through with you!"

"Such a strong man," croaked one eighty-seven, "and, yet, so very much afraid."

Van Owen unholstered his revolver, an American Smith and Wesson Model 66. The stainless steel magnum looked huge in his fist as the bore swung towards one eighty-seven.

"Ever take a couple, *kaffir?*" Seeing

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the look in the man's eyes, Van Owen added, "I won't kill you, you know. The first one goes in your foot. The next, right in the kneecap. If you think you know what pain is, my friend, I promise you, you've only just begun to learn."

One eighty-seven struggled to rise to a sitting position. After several false tries, he made it. "I don't think I can move any more, Van Owen," he said. "You're going to have to shoot me."

"You'll move, all right. Now, open that door."

"I ... all right." He sighed, heavily. "All right. I'll try."

Dragging himself with his hands, one eighty-seven began to crawl across the floor.

"Come on, come on...."

It took an eternity, it seemed, for him to reach the door, but reach it he did. His hand raised itself up, limply, moving like the neck of a dying swan. His hand clasped the doorknob. Turned.

The door came ajar. One eighty-seven let go of the knob and dragged himself back a bit. Then, taking hold of the door itself, near the floor, he pulled it inward, into the room, opening it fully. Van Owen stood so that he could not see out through the doorway.

"Tell me what you see!"

One eighty-seven looked at him through the slits of ruined eyes. He was not defeated. Cagey caution prevailed, even while the confusion remained. He answered slowly, literally. "I see the hallway ... a chair, made out of wood ... a ceiling light...."

Van Owen rushed to the door. It was true. The hall was empty and silent, save for the muted buzzing of a fluorescent bulb. He stepped outside, uneasily. A light burned at the far end of the hall — his office. There was the halting clicking of a typewriter as Gerhardt stumbled through the latest in the series of reports Van Owen submitted daily, weekly, unceasingly, it seemed, on the heretofore mute one eighty-seven. Van Owen rubbed his hand against his damp forehead and grinned. He could handle it. It was nothing new. Lapses of reality under stress, resulting in hallucinations. He'd slapped men out of them before.

"So much for holier-than-thou, old son," he murmured.

Machine-gun fire didn't faze him, but messiahs are unsettling. An emaciated, battered black messiah. Interesting casting. Up till now, a trouble-making *kaffir*. Up till now. He gazed back at the almost motionless form half sitting on the floor inside the cell.

"You're a wonder, you are, son." He pointed an accusatory finger at the black man. "And you won't sneak up on me, again."

One eighty-seven stared back at him, uncomprehending.

"You don't know what I'm talking about, do you, my little *klonkie?*" There was no answer. "Mmm. It's just as well. We'll dance some more, you

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and I, only next time, I'll play a different tune."

Van Owen slammed the door on the numberless cell. His last sight of one eighty-seven was that same composed, curious, unblinking stare. No sound came from behind the door.

There was no sound in the hall. The erratic sound of typing had ceased with the slamming of the door.

"All right, Gerhardt," he called, "just leave it on my desk. You can finish it off tomorrow."

There was no reply. The door remained closed.

"Gerhardt! Gerhardt, are you deaf, man?" The fluorescent tube seemed to buzz more loudly. "*Bliksem,*" Van Owen muttered, "bastard." Thirty paces brought him to the door. He wrenched it open....

One eighty-seven was halfway onto the cot. His upper body slumped face-down upon the filthy canvas, his waist and legs trailed behind him on the floor like so much shapeless protoplasm. Mechanically, the head lifted and slowly swiveled in his direction.

It had returned. The same feeling he had known during those nights in the Sinai, in the jungles of Cambodia, in the alleys of Marseilles. It was as though someone or something leaned against him, exerting a great pressure, and his limbs tingled and lost all strength.

His eyes narrowed, involuntarily attempting to shut out the unacceptable reality. It was a struggle to get the words out past the constriction in his throat.

"How ... are ... you ... doing ... this ... to me?" Van Owen gurgled. He moved towards the black man, sluggishly. Fingers working with spastic jerks. Fire in the lungs. "Do you think you can play with me like those stupid black animals in the fields? You think I'll fall for your martyr's juju? Your witch doctor shenanigans?"

Van Owen reached forward, grasping the prisoner by the neck and hauling him almost to his feet. "I won't take any more of your shit, *kaffir!*" he

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screamed, using his full force to hurl the man against the wall.

One eighty-seven hit with a soft thump, like a heavily stuffed pillow. He slid down onto the floor. There was defiant hatred in his eyes.

"What are you doing to me, goddamnit, what are you doing?" Van Owen screamed, kicking him in the ribs again and again.

The black man seemed to be beyond pain. Yet not beyond acceptance. "What *can* I do to you?" he rasped, genuine incredulity in his voice.

Van Owen stopped. His face was white. The purest white that it had ever been. His lower lip was trembling. There was an evil weight upon his chest. His eyes began to glaze.

Gerhardt turned the keys in the door, balancing the bowl of slop that passed for prisoners' breakfast in his other hand. The cell was empty. There was no way for the man to have escaped, yet there was no denying the obvious evidence of his senses. Gerhardt gave the alarm.

Van Owen could not be reached. Van Owen could not be found. The guards at Robben Island drew their own conclusions. Only, they never spoke them aloud. Nothing was ever said, no agreement ever reached, no paperwork crossed anybody's desk. Another prisoner was placed into the cell. his number entered onto official records. The matter passed from memory.

In a dark room on Robben Island, just off the coast of the mainland, near Capetown, a man with no name hung manacled from the ceiling. Sweat streamed from his pores, every one of which was open and screaming.

A man sat against the far wall of the cell. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth. Van Owen had bitten through his tongue.

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Here is a first-rate story about an unpleasantly sanitized future. Its author writes: "I was one of those Sputnik young scientists, drawn into science by the romance of the space program. Then, like many of my generation, I was driven away from science study during the sixties, went on to earn a Ph.D. in English from Cambridge University and began teaching writing and literature at Indiana University." Mr. Sanders has published a book on D. H. Lawrence and many magazine pieces, but this is his first appearance in the sf field.

Terrarium

BY

SCOTT SANDERS

Phoenix thought of her as the barefooted walker. On a day when the pressure inside Oregon City and inside his head seemed no greater than usual, no more conducive to visions, he emerged from his apartment, and there she was, pacing in the wrong direction on the pedbelt. By matching her stride to the speed of the conveyor, the woman managed to stay at the same point in the corridor, just opposite his doorway. Her lithe body, stirring fiercely in one spot, reminded Phoenix of the conjoined whirl and stillness of a gyroscope.

This prodigy backed his rump against his shut door. Embarrassed, he looked down, but not before catching a glimpse of red hair escaping from the woman's hood, cheeks showing feverishly through a skimpy mask of cosmetics, green gown actually darkened with perspiration below the arms and around the neck. The corridor trapped her scent, forced him to breathe it. Just an animal, a throwback, he thought — and he felt aroused and ashamed. By lowering his gaze he hoped to give the woman a chance to recover her senses, to withdraw from his life. When he saw her bare feet he grew so flustered he lost control of his eyes. So he had the misfortune to be staring at her feverish cheek when she turned on him and said, "It's called walking, you idiot."

Abruptly she stopped her pacing, and the pedbelt carried her out of sight, bare feet and all, beyond a curve in the hallway.

Phoenix filled his lungs slowly, emptied them. The ventilator banished her smell within seconds. But the image of her face, flushed, practically naked beneath the film of cosmetics, stuck fast in his memory. He went on to

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work, transferring from pedbelt to escalator to elevator, and eventually to the roller-chair that deposited him at his desk, where he bent as usual over the satellite photos. But rather than hunt for signs of hurricanes, thermal inversions, radiation storms, for the thousand signs of Earth's assault on the human system, his eyes kept tracing the shape of the woman's face in the cloud patterns, the lines of her body in the contours of continents.

After work, instead of visiting the gamepark or chemmie-traveling or listening to a rhetoric tournament, he went directly home. There was no barefooted woman pacing on the conveyor, of course, since both pedbelts were littered with riders. Of course, Phoenix reassured himself, of course. He spread his palm against the lockplate on his door, then stood there for a minute in the opening, glancing sidelong at the double stream of riders. All their feet were covered, their legs still, their heads properly hooded or wigged, their bodies hidden beneath gowns, their faces expertly masked. No one returned his wary glance.

It pained him to enter the apartment. The room's orderliness oppressed him more than ever before. Nothing invited his touch — not the glinting domes of the console, not the photomurals on the wall that were just then shifting their kaleidoscopic designs to mark the beginning of a new hour, not the glittering angles of his furniture. The air brought no smell to his nose, deposited no taste on his tongue. He rearranged a few pillows, left a cabinet standing open, but without any real hope of disturbing the order of the place. Slumped in the softest chair, burning his lips on a cup of hot narco, Phoenix scrutinized the geography of his life, seeking some wild place that might accommodate the longing aroused in him by this barefooted woman.

Days ticked by. Each morning before work he peered out through the spyhole in his door, but with less and less apprehension of seeing her. Just when his life was composing itself again, when the satellite photos were only rarely taking on the contours of her face, one day he looked out and there she was again, in sweat-darkened green, pacing along the pedbelt. The lens of the spyhole made her appear swollen. Her naked feet seemed to dangle from a bulbous torso; her head, with its escape of red hair, bobbed from the rhythm of her walking. Wondering how any creature so unappetizing could have ransacked his mind, Phoenix opened the door. It was a mistake. Again he suffered the misfortune of catching her full stare, glimpsing the moist cheeks through the film of makeup, sensing the swim of her legs beneath the gown.

This time she pronounced the words calmly: "It's called walking. You should try it."

The chill in her voice told him she had no memory of meeting him before.

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All these days while he had been suffering around Oregon City with her image spiked into his brain, she had salted him away in the vaults of forgetfulness together with a million other once-glimpsed faces.

"Do you mind?" she said, never breaking stride. "There's less traffic here."

Looking away down the corridor, he shook his head no, then in confusion nodded yes, unsure just what he was answering. The woman kept at her walking, matching the conveyor's pace. Phoenix shilly-shallied on his threshold, immobilized by a sudden vision of himself as he must appear to her: bouffant wig of iridescent blue, face painted to resemble the video image of an actor whose name he could not remember, every inch of flesh cloaked in a moodgown. Doubtless the garment was presently a fireworks of color, vainly attempting to express his inner pandemonium. He could not bear to look at the display his gown was making.

"I don't mind," he said, and felt his nostrils flaring with the scent of her, "why should I mind?" She smiled, and he winced. The smile, the private sharing of words, the eye contact, the exposed face: it was all coming in such a rush, shattering the rules of sexual approach. Momentarily reckless, he asked, "Your feet — do they hurt?"

"Never. That's why I walk barefoot, to keep them tough."

"And why have them tough?"

"So I can walk barefoot."

"But why walk at all?" Phoenix demanded in vexation. Before he could slice into her circular reasoning, passengers loomed around the curve, and the woman, with no attempt at disguising her smile, crossed to the other pedbelt and rode away out of sight.

For a long time he stood in his doorway, hoping. But traffic thickened in the corridor and the woman never reappeared. Or perhaps she did pass again, duly costumed and painted, camouflaged in the crowd. Passing, she might even have seen him, and still not been able to distinguish him from the hundred others who were decked out this morning in iridescent blue wigs, and whose faces were patterned after that video actor with the forgettable name. Phoenix felt paltry, lurking there on his threshold, at once conspicuous and invisible.

Finally he surrendered to the day, to work, to an afternoon of lightshows, to an evening of brain-frazzling puzzles at the gamepark; and then he surrendered to the return home, to the waterbed, to sleep. Dreams of the barefooted woman stalked through his skull. An extra dose of narco did no good. A bout on the eros couch, with the gauge spun all the way over to visionary delight, offered only mechanical relief. Electronics could not reach the territory in his mind where the woman's image kept burning and burning.

* * *

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Desire melted away what little order remained in his life. The apartment grew shabby. Friends stopped scheduling daykillers with him when he failed to show up a second time or a third. His costume suffered, at first from neglect, and then from his deliberate search for idiosyncrasy. He wanted to be visible to the woman when he met her again. So he hauled out unstylish clothes, ones that paid no attention to his body chemistry but just hung upon him in outrageous combinations. His wigs grew increasingly bizarre. His facepaint appeared slapdash, as if applied in the dark by a vindictive cosmetician. Wherever he went in Oregon City, the glances of passersby slithered along at his heels.

At work the satellite photos looked more than ever like a stew of lips and ankles and trailing hair. His supervisor made him rewrite a third of the eco-warnings and advised him to cut back on the narco. But Phoenix was not applying narco or any other balm to his inflamed heart. Nothing half so vivid as this love-ache had ever seized him before, and he was in no hurry to escape the exquisite pain.

Days off work he spent vainly trying to discover some timetable in the barefooted woman's exercise. But he had no more luck than the ancients had at predicting sunspots. When she did loom into sight, he kept indoors, not yet ready to meet her again. Every night he paced with naked feet around the perimeter of his room. Five steps and then turn, five steps and then turn: the blisters multiplied on his soles. After two weeks of this, questioning his sanity at each step, he could walk for an hour without panting, and his feet began to leather over.

Training on the pedbelt was more risky, only possible at two or three in the morning, when anyone traveling through the corridor would most likely be as eccentric as he. Soon he was able, with very little puffing, to stay abreast of his room for half an hour. Struggling to defeat the conveyor's ceaseless motion, he did not feel like a gyroscope; he felt like a lunatic.

On one of his three a.m. training sessions he was striding along, engrossed in the study of his feet, when her voice broke over him:

"So you tried it?"

Looking up, he met the achingly familiar stare. "Yes," he mumbled, "I wondered what it was like."

"And how do you like it?"

"Very much." Witlessly he repeated, "Very much."

For several seconds the two of them paced side-by-side, two lunatics out for a stroll. From the corner of his eye Phoenix enjoyed the woman's profile, her skin showing more nakedly than ever through the paint, her legs kicking against the loose fall of gown. Elegant concentration of energy.

"Good for the heart and lungs," she said.

"Heart," he agreed, "lungs."

"And legs."

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He loosed this sexual word without thinking: "Legs."

The woman calmly continued, as if she were in stage four of the mating ritual. "My name is Teeg Passio."

He could sense the expectant twist in her body as she waited for a response. "Name?" he blurted. "Marshall."

"Only Marshall?"

"Phoenix Marshall."

"You're not offended? About the name?"

"No. Certainly not. I don't really accept all the — well — the formalities."

"Stupid waste of time, aren't they?"

Phoenix heard himself agreeing, passionately: "Like a web. Everywhere you go you get tangled in them."

"Cut loose, is what I say."

He stilled his tongue, alarmed by the chaos into which her talk was stirring him. He could feel the sweat trickling down his face, streaking the paint, dampening the collar of his moodgown.

"How often do you walk?" she asked.

"Oh, every day. Sometimes twice a day."

"Any special time?"

His eye was caught by the unruly surge of hair around the edges of her hood. His fingers twitched. "Morning," he said, then quickly added, "night, just about any time. My schedule's flexible. And you?"

Her smile seemed to raise the temperature in the corridor several degrees. "I don't keep a schedule. But maybe we could set a time, meet for a walk. That is, if you —"

"I would. Yes, very much," he said with a rush.

"I know places we can walk without these idiot conveyors getting in the way."

"Anywhere's fine, anywhere."

"How about Shasta Gamepark at 1600 tomorrow? South gate?"

"Sure," he muttered, reduced to monosyllables, "fine."

"Peace," she said, and began to drift away on the pedbelt.

"Wait," he begged. In a panic he thought for ways to keep her, fearing that such an improbable creature might not survive until tomorrow. "Do you live in Portland Complex?"

"Seven floors above you." Walking again, she kept her place on the belt. Arched above her face the hair formed a red border of turbulence.

"And what brings you through here for exercise?" he said.

"Looking for a walking partner."

"Oh." Again he scrambled for words. "And why do you walk?"

The smile again, crippling all his faculties. "I'm in training."

"Training?"

"For going away."

Unlikely as it seemed to Phoenix, Teeg did meet him at the gamepark, and they did walk for an hour on mo-

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tionless pathways of sea-green glass. "From a skategame they used to play," she explained, patting the scuffed walkway with her bare foot, "back when kids used their legs." On days following, they hiked around the cinder track of an abandoned stadium, along hydrogen pipelines marked EXPLOSIVE, through tunnels reeking with brine. "You forget the whole city is afloat," she told him, cupping a handful of ocean water to sniff at, "until you come down here. We forget a lot of things." His thighs quivered in sympathy with the incessant thrum of the mammoth pumps and extractors.

As they wandered on other days along shuttle roads in the hydroponics district, or down aisles between huge whirling energy-storage wheels, Phoenix discovered parts of Oregon City he had only known about from video; and, in his increasingly anarchic talks with Teeg, he discovered parts of himself he had never known about at all. Signals kept arriving from forgotten regions of his body, aches at first, then pleasures, as if nerve and muscle were conspiring with heart to make his celebration of this love unanimous.

She was a squall of questions. What work do you do? Who are your parents? Any children? Ever go outside? And so he told her about his training in geo-meteorology, about his job studying satellite photographs — "Because I have a good eye for patterns," he boasted shamelessly, "something the computers still can't match" — and he told her about his mother's death in the 2067 fusion implosion at Texas City, about his father's twenty-year drug coma, told her his sperm was duly banked away but remained unused, told her he had never stuck so much as his nose outside the human system, told her, in a voice that surprised him with its urgency, how restless he felt, how lonely, how trapped.

And all the while Teeg was nodding yes, yes, that is truly how it is, and between questions she was telling about herself: most of her life spent in the wilds, traveling about the northwest corner of the continent with her mother, who had been in charge of dismantling Portland, Vancouver, Anchorage, lesser places; her work now mostly outside the dome, back on land, repairing communications terminals; her ova used for nine — or perhaps eleven, she forgot — children, all of them grown in other women; mated three times, never happily, never long, twice with men and once with a woman.

"You're licensed to go outside?" he asked.

"Why so surprised?" she answered. "You think all those pipes and tubes and transformers maintain themselves?"

"But aren't you a risk, having lived outside so long?"

"Not many people will take the work. Too messy out there in the wilds, too raw. And those who do, except the suicidal maniacs, know enough

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about the defenses to avoid thoughts of sabotage. The most I could do is just stay out there after some job, never come back. Outside, I'm no threat. It's inside the city I'm a threat."

Phoenix felt her eyes searching him for some response, and he pretended to be absorbed in watching his feet, his long-boned and brazenly naked feet, scuffling along beside hers. "Do you think about that sometimes — staying outside?"

"Sometimes," she confessed; then after a few more steps she said, "Often. All the time, in fact. In my twenty-seven years I've only lived in the city five, maybe six of them. Here is the place that seems alien to me," she said, sweeping both arms overhead, trailing the gauzy sleeves like wings, "and outside is home. Everytime, coming back inside, it's a wrenching."

One moment the dome seemed to Phoenix impossibly high, higher than the sky ever could have been, and the next moment it seemed a brutal weight pressing down on him.

"It's like crawling back inside a bottle," she continued, "a huge sterilized bottle for culturing people."

A feeling of claustrophobia rose in his throat, nearly choking him, like the ancient bitter taste of food long-since swallowed and forgotten. He stopped walking, halfway across Marconi Plaza, and the city snapped tight around him. Apartment towers glistened feverishly with the trapped energy of several million lives; the pedbelts and glider paths sliced the airspace into hectic curves; offices repeated the same honeycomb pattern, like geometrical stuttering, as far as the eye could see. The sudden pressure of the city on his mind was so intense that he did not notice for several seconds the lighter pressure of Teeg's hand on his arm.

"You never felt that before?" she asked gently.

"Always," he answered, "always and always. But I hardly ever admitted it before. The frenzy — it's always there, like death, waiting. But you fight it down, hide it away. Then at night you lie in bed and a crevice opens in your heart, and the dread creeps out, a fog, engulfing you, and you know death better than you know the taste of your own saliva, know it will come, know it will mean annihilation, forever and ever." He stopped abruptly, ashamed of his passion.

"Yes?" she urged.

But he would not speak. Without planning their next walk, they parted in Marconi Plaza. Phoenix rode the pedbelt home, aware for the first time in weeks of the alarmed glances his helter-skelter costume and his bare feet provoked. Surely people would think he was crazed, afloat on a tide of chemmies, reverting to beasthood. Perhaps they would even notify the health-patrollers, who would rehabilitate him. But he could rehabilitate himself, could fight down the chaos that Teeg had unleashed in him.

Safely back in his room, he scrub-

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bed himself, dressed in his most fashionable moodgown and wig, then applied a fresh mask, painting very carefully, copying the face of a dance champion whose poster hung beside the dressing mirror.

All that day and the next he rode through Oregon City, visiting eros parlors, attending rhetoric matches, watching electro-ball, clinging to his old entertainments. He played four-dimensional chess with Sol, designed murals with Hinta, even resumed lackadaisical mating rituals with two women who had nearly forgotten him. But it was all a charade. The print of Teeg's hand could not be shaken from his arm; the sound of her voice, so confident in its anarchism, and the image of the city as a vast sterile bottle, could not be erased from his mind.

After three days of this charade, he gave up and called Teeg. "Sickness," he lied to her. "Little bout with headache."

"Ache." She echoed the word as if it were a place he had gone to visit.

"How about a walk today?" he asked.

"Tomorrow," she said. "We'll study some maps in your room."

"Maps?"

"From work." Her metallic voice emerged from the speaker with a hint of irritation. "You do use thousand-to-one scale maps for weather grids?"

"Yes."

"Okay, I want the sections for the Oregon coast from 43 degrees to 46 degrees." She waited through a few seconds of his silence. "Is there any problem with that?"

"No," he answered hastily. "Is microfiche all right?"

"You have a projector at your place?"

"Of course."

"Okay. Microfiche. But I'll want some polyfilm prints later."

They agreed on a time. She repeated the latitudes, as if he were a child with a porous memory. She spoke in a voice as tough as the soles of her feet. Hearing her now without seeing her, Phoenix realized that the boldness he had originally interpreted as a sexual advance was merely an impatience with rules, an urgency that burned through all obstacles.

At greatest magnification the relief map shone upon the screen as a snarl of dunes, cliffs, inlets, riverbeds. Each landform was a distinct color, forming a crazy-quilt of shades and textures. The disorder of it made Phoenix feel slightly nauseous.

"They don't supply you with maps when you go out for repairs?" he asked.

Teeg was crouching near the screen, haunches on bare heels, tracing the shape of a bay that hooked into the coast like a bent finger of blue. "No. The computer guides my shuttle to the coordinates, wherever they happen to be. I just climb outside the tube and work on transformers, or cables, some-

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times on the tube itself. There'll be mountains, maybe. Forests. Sometimes even deserts. But I usually don't have any clues where those things are on a map."

"Usually?"

"Some landmarks I remember from traveling with my mother, especially around the coastal cities south of Portland, the last places she dismantled." Pointing to the map, she crooked her finger to mimic the blue hook of water. "This bay, for instance. I remember that place. She used to take me wading there."

"In the ocean?"

A sudden fury made her eyes turn smoky, the same fury he had glimpsed on that first day when he had gawked at her bare feet. "Yes, the ocean. The stuff we're floating on, the stuff we're mining and eating and tapping for energy, the stuff we pump through Oregon City every day in billions of liters. What's wrong with wading in it?"

Instead of answering, Phoenix forced himself to look at the chaos on the screen. The only straight lines visible on the map were the tube routes, angling north to Alaska City and south to California City, or trailing away eastward, where further maps would show them reaching the land cities of Wyoming and Iowa, the float cities on Lake Michigan and Erie and Ontario, then further east to the oldest float cities along the New England coast. At work, Phoenix preferred using a schematic map of the continent, which showed the hundred-odd land cities as bright red circles, the thirty float cities as green squares, and the connecting tubes as stripes of black or yellow or blue. This entire scheme was superimposed on a grid of computer coordinates, and behind it all lurked the shadowy outline of North America.

Queasiness finally made him look away from the screen. "You're going out there someday? To stay?"

Without turning from the map, she said, "I'd like to make polyfilm copies of this stretch."

"Are you?" he insisted.

She faced him now. "Who knows?"

"It's madness. Sure death."

"If you don't know what you're doing."

"And you know, do you? A few scrambled childhood memories and glimpses from the repair shuttle, and you think you know how to survive in the wilds?"

"I can survive."

"Alone?"

A quietness unclenched her fists, relaxed her body, her voice. "If I have to."

For the next few days her answering tapes informed him she was meditating, she was at the clinic, she was on a repair mission, she was indefinitely and excruciatingly beyond reach. When he did finally track her down, overtaking her as she entered the fire-

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stairs for her daily fifteen-story climb, she told him she was about to leave for a two-week seminar in Alaska City. Something to do with thermionics.

Desperate, he ignored the elementary rules of sexual approach, asking her bluntly: "Can I go with you?"

"Phoenix —"

"I can arrange leave. We can talk after your classes. Walk in the disney there. It's a fine one — famous — with mechanoes of animals from all the continents —"

"Phoenix!" He hushed. She let him chill for a few seconds. Then she calmly told him, "Another time. This trip I'm very busy. Understood?"

He mumbled an answer. Breathless from the stairs, he halted at the next landing and let Teeg climb ahead by herself. Something about the determined swing of her hips, something in the angry strength of her climbing, so alien to everything he had been raised to believe about the body, convinced him that she really would slip away from Oregon City one day, enter that chaos of the map, never look back. That meant annihilation, first of the mind, cut off from civilization, then of the body, poisoned or broken or devoured by the wilds. Dizziness sat him down upon the landing. The metal felt cold through his gown. With eyes closed he listened to Teet's bare feet slapping on the stairs above him, fainter and fainter as she climbed.

* * *

Yes, the work coordinator assured him, Teeg Passio was on a two-week leave. Yes, the institute informed him, a Teeg Passio was signed up for the thermionics seminar. But when Phoenix actually reached Alaska City, grown reckless from his desire to see her, he found that she had never registered with travel control, nor with the health board, nor with the institute. The officials studied him cautiously. Do you need a psyche session? they inquired. No, thanks, he assured them. Just a change of air. But our air is the same as yours, surely? Yes, of course. Fatigue, he explained, nothing more.

His return to Oregon City was delayed by a leak in the seatube — someone evidently had failed to warn about a hurricane or a shift in ocean current — and by the time his shuttle was on its way he felt crazed. The curved walls, the molded seats, the incessant loudspeaker babble: everything squeezed in upon him. Bottle, he kept thinking, glass bottle.

Back in Oregon City he could discover nothing more about her going. Do you want us to list her as missing? the health patrollers asked. Put a trace on her? No, Phoenix answered, backing away. She'll turn up. Just a misunderstanding.

Nothing to do but wait, and turn over the possibilities one-by-one like cards in a dead-end game of solitaire: she had lied to him about going to Alaska City? she had been mangled by some piece of machinery? she had been

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stolen? she had gone outside to stay? The maps, he thought: perhaps that was all she had ever wanted from him. She might have known he was a geometeorologist, might have lured him with her walking just to get hold of them. But no — that was nonsense. How many people would have opened their doors to find her outside walking, barefooted, and felt nothing but mild alarm or loathing? She could never have predicted this fierce hunger the sight of her triggered in him, this boiling-over of restlessness. She could not have known he would envy her for living in a space less entangled than his own, a space in which voice, eyes, arms seemed to move in gentler gravity.

In those two weeks of fretting, he discovered how little presence of mind his ordinary life required. He traveled through the city, performed the necessary bows and signals in conversation, processed skeins of satellite photographs, fed himself at the cafeteria, even played mediocre chess, all without diverting his thoughts from Teeg. He became convinced that she had gone outside, into the chaotic world of the map. At odd moments — while a lightshow played on the screen or the eros couch worked at him with its electronic charms — he would visualize that map in all its unruly colors, and he would imagine her as a tiny laboring speck lost in it, lost climbing through mountains, lost wading in that blue hooked finger of water.

If she came back — when she came back — she had to come back — he would find some way to keep her from ever again putting him through this agony. Make her take him with her next time — but not outside, not there, somewhere human, safe. The inland cities. The spas. Anywhere but the wilds. And he would persuade her to change jobs, never go outside again. And if she insisted on going — if she insisted — then he would inform on her as a health risk, get her wilder-license revoked.

And then she'd be trapped in this bottle as surely as I am, Phoenix admitted. Trapped — but alive, insulated from that hostile disorder out there, shielded from disease, from weather, beasts, hunger, pain. It was simple nostalgia, he told himself, this yearning for the wild, a mixture of childhood memories and antique books. Part of him was not persuaded, the part that trembled with a faint echo of ancient rhythms when he was in her presence.

His fingers shook as he punched the code for the health board. He explained his concern to the mechano face on the phonescreen, but without giving Teeg's name.

"Then you want Infection Division," the mechano said, its jaw slightly out of synchronization with the words.

Soon Phoenix was talking to another mechano, which patiently recited the relevant portions of the code: Only

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licensed wildergoers are permitted to leave the human system, and only for authorized functions. Such personnel must be sanitized before re-entering the human system. Any persons breaking this code, either by leaving without authorization or by returning without decontamination, constitute an infection threat, and will be treated as beasts.

"Treated as beasts?" Phoenix repeated.

"One who deliberately endangers the human system becomes a part of Earth — a beast," the mechano explained.

Within seconds the keys began clattering on the printer in his room, typing out a form headed INFECTION ALERT.

Fingering the slick polyfilm sheet, Phoenix asked the mechano, "And if the person is a licensed wildergoer?"

"First offense, revocation of license. Second offense, quarantine. Third, exile. Fourth, extermination." The mechano paused for what seemed to Phoenix a carefully measured space of time. Then it asked, "Do you wish to report name and circumstances?"

"No," Phoenix replied. "I am merely concerned. I have no evidence."

"Very well." Again the measured pause, the scrutiny by an eyeless face. "Infection from the outside is the gravest remaining threat to the human system. You do not wish to report?"

"Not at the present time."

Only when the mechano vanished from the screen did Phoenix realize that he had been addressing it in polite mode, with face turned at right angles, eyes lowered, body rigid, as if this machine, animated and sightless, were the most appealing of human strangers. Two weeks without Teeg, and already the web of inhibitions was tightening around him again.

The messages he left on her answering tape all made the same plea: Call Phoenix Marshall immediately upon arriving. When she finally did appear, it was not on the screen but at his door, hood thrown back to reveal an unkempt blaze of red hair, face bare of paint, yet reddened in a way he had never seen before.

"Hate those things," she explained, pointing a finger with a broken nail at his phone.

"How did you like the seminar?" he asked her carefully.

"Never went to Alaska City."

Watching her pad familiarly about his room, Phoenix looked for some taint of wilderness on her. Her wrists and ankles, escaping from the cuffs of er haphazard gown, seemed to be the same shade of red as her face. Her scent ran like a fire in his throat. He sensed more keenly than before that lightness in her movements, that thinning of gravity, as she sniffed at a bowl of cucumbers, turned over a dropped solitaire card with one deft flick of her toe.

"So where did you go?"

She yielded him a faint smile. "Away."

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"Outside?"

"Wolf Bay, to be precise. Look." From the pouch in her gown she tugged the map, now rumpled and torn from repeated foldings. Squatting cross-legged on the floor, she spread the polyfilm across her lap and eagerly pointed where he expected her to point, at the blue finger of ocean that hooked into the Oregon coast about 44 degrees. "Mother's journal called it Wolf Bay, and the water is colder than I remembered. Goosebumps — you know what I mean? Little bumps, like on a goose, all over my body. And she wrote that there were sea lions north of there a few kilometers, in caves, and I found them. I heard them barking — or whatever it is they do — half an hour before I reached them along the cliff."

A parade of childhood pictures began streaming through his mind. "You saw actual sea lions?"

"Not only saw them — smelled them. And the rock flowers! The spray! You've got to come see."

And so she went on for an hour, for two hours, in a delirium of talk, tracing her explorations on the map, pulling at his hands as if to lead him there that very moment, looking up occasionally to read his face. Unable to halt the parade of childhood visions, Phoenix kept himself turned away. The desire he felt for her, and the dread, swelled to encompass the sea lions, the fossils, the slender ferns she told him of in her enraptured voice.

"Fossils!" she cried, as if this single word should convince him to share the delirium with her. "Leaves and ferns and even — once — a three-toed footprint between the layers of slate. And in the shallows of a great drowsy river I found some reedy things growing that mother had a sketch of — cattails. Isn't that a name? And birds! Why doesn't the video ever show any landscape with birds — or even with trees? Oh, just come look!" And she grasped both his hands in hers and tried to dance him round the room. But his legs would not bend; his whole body was rigid with the effort of containing his inner tumult. He wrenched his hands free.

"Teeg, you've got to promise never to go outside again."

She laughed once, harshly. "Dream on. Haven't you been listening to me?"

"You can't recreate that old world. You can't crawl back into your mother's journal. All that's finished."

"I don't need to create anything. It's all there, waiting. All I have to do is walk into it."

"To a brutal death."

Stretching her arms wide, she spun in a circle, gown and hair awhirl. "You see any wounds?" He shrugged, avoiding her stare. But she danced sideways until he was facing her again, looking into her inflamed eyes. "Hasn't your body taught you anything after all these months of walking? We were *made* to live out there, shaped to it. Look," she said, her voice softening,

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"just think. We've been inside — what? thirty, forty years. And before that humans lived outside, how long? Millions of years."

"In misery, sickness, constant fear," he objected.

"Not always. Not always. Listen, Phoenix, I know what I'm doing. I've been stashing supplies and equipment outside one of the repair stations ever since I started work on the trouble-shooters."

"No," he mumbled, head bent, hands over ears, "you can't go back."

"I'm not talking about going back. I'm talking about going ahead. I'm not saying it would be easy to survive. But possible — possible."

"No no no."

When at last he looked up, she was gone, the door standing open. On the threshold rested a small grey parallelogram of stone. Slate? Stooping warily over it, he could see the faint imprint of a leaf in the surface — or perhaps it was a fern — it had been many years since he had looked at pictures of plants. With a celluloid tablemat he scooped up the stone, held it near his face. There was a faint smell of dust, damp. The tiny veins of the leaf — fern, whatever it was — formed a riotous maze of intersecting lines that reminded him of the map's labyrinth of rivers. Had it been decontaminated? Where had she found it, in what mire out there? For a long time he hesitated, fingers poised a few centimeters above the stone. And then at last he touched the mazy indentation, gingerly, so as not to injure himself. The delicate lines of the fossil proved hard, harder than his cautious fingers.

The stone felt cold in his palm, slick with perspiration, as he shifted from foot to callused foot before her door. That was her doing, the calluses, the twitching in his legs, the lust for escape. Passengers streamed by on the pedbelts, slashing him with their glances as he debated what to do. But he ignored them, and that also was her doing. Should he report her, get her wilder-license revoked, then try to talk her into sanity again? Could he betray her that way? Or should he let her make those journeys outside, each one longer, until, one day, she failed to return? Could he actually go out there with her? His heart raced faster than it ever had from their walking or stair climbing.

At last he rang, and the door clicked open. For the first time he entered her lair, smelling her, but unable to see anything in the dim light. He groped his way forward. "Teeg?"

"In here."

Her voice came from a second room, visible only as a vertical streak of blue light where the door stood ajar. With halting steps, hands raised to fend off obstacles, Phoenix picked his way through the darkness toward the blue slither of light. As he approached, the door eased open, forcing him to

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shield his eyes from the brightness. Swimming in the wash of blue was Teeg's silhouette, not naked, surely, but with arms and legs distinctly outlined. Was she in her working gear, a shimmersuit?

"I found this," he said, reaching the fossil toward her in open palm.

"That was for you to keep," she snapped. "A gift for parting."

"Not parting," he insisted. "I didn't come to return it. I came to ask you to read it for me — tell me what it means — tell me — I don't know." He halted in confusion. The hard edge of her voice, the blue glare, the inner turmoil made his eyes water. "You've got to be patient with me."

"Give you time to file that infection alert?"

"I didn't mean for you to see that."

"No, I'll bet you didn't."

"I won't file it. I can't."

She studied him. "Why did you even get it?"

"To keep you."

"What do you mean, keep me?"

"Keep you safe, keep you inside."

"Well, I won't be kept inside, not by you or the health board or anybody."

His eyes still watered, but he could make out her swift movements as she paced about the room gathering vials and cassettes and food capsules into a massive carrycase. It was a shimmersuit she wore, silvered to reflect sunlight, body-shaped to allow for work on the outside, where there was sunlight and where there were no strangers to be offended by the human silhouette.

"You're not going out to stay?" he demanded.

"I hadn't planned on it. Not yet, not alone. I wanted a few others — a community — a little cluster of us. But I'm tired of pleading, tired of explaining. You're the fifth person I've tried, the fifth walker. Enthusiastic up to a point, until I mention the idea of settling outside, and then you all run scuttling away."

"You never told me."

"I didn't want to spell it out. I wanted you to *want* it, hunger for the wilds the way I do." Her anger drove her prowling back and forth in front of him. Beyond her, directly under the hanging blue lamps, he could see a glass tank filled with a writhing mat of green. Plants? In the city? Her angry stalking drew his eyes away.

"But how can I want what I've never had?" he said. "This is all I know." With outspread arms he gestured to indicate the floating city, the thousands of miles of travel tubes, and the dozen other cities he had visited, always inside, always insulated from the beast world.

She stopped her prowling directly in front of him, a constellation of silver. Her stare no longer made him wince. And he noticed her eyes were the same grey as the slate he still held stupidly in his hand. "All you know," she murmured, grasping him by a

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wrist, "then come look at this."

She led him to the glass tank, drew him down to kneel with her and peer through the translucent wall. Inside was an explosion of tendrils, petals, stems, dangling frail seed pods, fierce blossoms like concentrations of fire, all of it in greens and browns and reds so vibrant they made Phoenix tremble. His eyes hunted for a branched leaf that would match the fossil she had given him, while his thumb searched out the delicate imprint in the stone. But there was too much activity in this amazing green stillness for him to see anything clearly.

"It's a terrarium," Teeg said. "A piece of the earth."

He ran his fingers along the glass wall, expecting to feel heat radiating from these intense creatures. But the tank was cool, sealed on all sides. "They're alive?"

She laughed at what she saw in his face. "Of course they're alive. That's dirt, the brown stuff."

"But how — closed in like that?"

"Wise little beasts, aren't they?" And she used the word *beasts* tenderly, as he had never heard it used before. "There is your chaos," she said, "that's what you're saving me from."

Phoenix started to protest that this was only a tiny fragment of the earth, without animals, without tornadoes or poisons or viruses, without winters. But his tongue felt heavy with astonishment. His eyes would not move from this miniature wilderness, at once so disorderly and so harmonious.

"Well," she said, her fingers tightening on his wrist, "will you go?"

"I might," he answered. And then, uncertainly, "I will."

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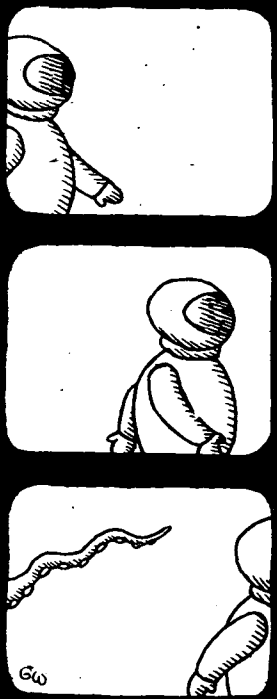
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



THE LATHE OF HEAVEN

An extraordinary thing happened last January.

For the first time, a major science fiction genre novel was brought to the screen*; in this case, the television screen.

This is so unprecedented in my experience that I discover it to have unexpected overtones, to be a whole new ball game, in fact. Just how, I'll get into in a minute.

First, in all fairness, I must note that I had had a brief connection with the production a while back. The producers had the good sense, when searching for potential material for a science fiction dramatization, to consult with people whom they considered knowledgeable in the field, among whom I felt flattered to be included.

While Ursula K. Le Guin works were among the first to be considered, I was not a proponent of *Lathe* (I was pushing Leiber's *The Big Time)* and, in fact, was a little apprehensive when it was announced to be the basis for the project. However, I feel the only prejudice this initial contact left with me was a positive one for the intelligence and good sense of those of the production team that I had met.

**For the inevitable nit-pickers, let me note that* The Shape of Things To Come *was pre-genre and not a novel in any case; "Who Goes There?" was a novelette; and* This Island Earth, The Man Who Fell to Earth, et al. *were either not major or non-genre.*

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However, it is still a factor extra to the telefilm itself, as is the other matter I hinted at above. This is the first time I have had occasion to review a movie based on a book for which I had enormous respect. And the interface of the two is a hard thing to get around. Ideally I would like to have viewed the film *as a film only*. Under the circumstances, this was impossible — as it was, I might note, for the many readers of this column who also know the book.

So, after all that, what did I think of it? I think it was an absolutely splendid effort, confused ultimately by factors that may well be inherent in the novel itself. (See, I can't get away from that interface.)

For those of you who have neither read nor seen *Lathe*, it concerns a young man of the near future whose dreams are effective, i.e. if he dreams of a change in reality, that change has occurred when he awakes, including all changes in the past needed to effect it.

For instance, if George dreams that the aunt who is currently staying in his household has died in an accident in California, he awakes to find that this has indeed happened and that there is no sign in the present reality that she has been visiting his family whatsoever.

George goes to a psychiatrist who learns to manipulate George's dreams, and therefore reality. In an effort to remake the world, the doctor merely manages to create chaos, in which most of the world's population is dead of plague and there is eventually an invasion of beneficent aliens from space. (This is a sort of ultimate extension of the old three wishes fable, in which the phrasing of the wish is all-important and which almost always results in ill for the wisher.)

Le Guin is so rationalist a writer that this fable is given enough justification to make it authentic science fiction. But that sort of thing needs words; as I've pointed out before, one of the problems with the filming of s/f is that so many of its speculative concepts need words, words, words to explain matters that are usually inexplicable by visual transmission of information.

So the latter part of the movie breaks down into what might be called mushy metaphysics, and what started out as a science fiction project ironically turns into a fable on the order of H. G. Wells's *The Man Who Could Work Miracles*.

Does that matter? In the long run, not in the least, except to the diehard s/f purists who will object to this being called science fiction (and in fact, PBS is referring to it as "speculative fiction," which pretty well covers all bases).

The ingredients in *Lathe* are fine, particularly the acting, a department I get to talk about all too seldom here. Bruce Davison is wry, put upon, and eventually nicely rebellious as George,

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the dreamer, and Kevin Conway as the doctor, is almost appealingly megalomanical.

Visually the film is often beautiful and always adequate. The costuming is particularly effective, likely for a near future without being outré, but not dull either; there are also little changes in costume for each reality change, a neat and sensible touch.

I am getting a bit tired of the dizzier pieces of Texas architecture being used as science fiction film sets, but in this case it's been done imaginatively. The special effects are minimal, some battles in space around the moon and an alien or two, but I found them convincing enough, and I particularly liked the aliens, who are sort of monochromatic '40s juke boxes. It should be noted that Ed Emshwiller ("Emsh" of s/f illustration fame) was the visual consultant. For that matter, it is essential to note that Le Guin herself was the creative consultant for the film.

But most of all, credit to producer-directors David Loxton and Fred Barzyk, and screenwriters Roger Swaybill and Diane English, for having created a film of ... shall we say speculative fiction, from a major novel of speculative fiction, wiithout condescension, condensation, or simplification. As I said, it's a first.

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Stephen King is the author of the best-selling novels SALEM'S LOT, THE STAND and, most recently, THE DEAD ZONE. The unusual and gripping story you are about to read is a sequel to "The Gunslinger" (October 1978), and the author has provided a short synopsis of the earlier story.

The Way Station

BY

STEPHEN KING

SYNOPSIS: The dark days have come; the last of the lights are guttering, flickering out — in the minds of men as well as in their dwellings. The world has moved on. Something has, perhaps, happened to the continuum itself. Dark things haunt the dark; communities stand alone and isolated. Some houses, shunned, have become the dens of demons.

Against this dying, twilit landscape, the gunslinger — last of his kind, and wearing the sandalwood-inlaid pistols of his father — pursues the man in black into the desert, leaving the last, tattered vestiges of life and civilization behind. In the town of Tull, now miles and days at his back, the man in black set him a snare; reanimated a corpse and set the town against him. The gunslinger has left them all dead, victims of the man in black's mordant prank and the deadly, mindless speed of his own hands.

Following the ashes of days-old fires, the gunslinger pursues the man in black.

He may be gaining, and it may be that the man in black knows the secret of The Dark Tower, which stands at the root of time. For it is not ultimately the man in black which the gunslinger seeks; it is the Tower.

The dark days have come.
The world has moved on.

A nursery rhyme had been playing itself through his mind all day, the maddening kind of thing that will not let go, that stands mockingly outside the apse of the conscious mind and makes faces at the rational being inside. The rhyme was:

The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain.
There is joy and also pain
but the rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain.

Pretty-plain, loony-sane
The ways of the world all will change
and all the ways remain the same
but if you're mad or only sane

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the rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain.

We walk in love but fly in chains
And the planes in Spain fall mainly in the rain.

We knew why the rhyme had occurred to him. There had been the recurring dream of his room in the castle and of his mother, who had sung it to him as he lay solemnly in the tiny bed by the window of many colors. She did not sing it at bedtimes because all small boys born to the High Speech must face the dark alone, but she sang to him at naptimes and he could remember the heavy gray rainlight that shivered into colors on the counterpane; he could feel the coolness of the room and the heavy warmth of blankets, love for his mother and her red lips, the haunting melody of the little nonsense lyric, and her voice.

Now it came back maddeningly, like prickly heat, chasing its own tail in his mind as he walked. All his water was gone, and he knew he was very likely a dead man. He had never expected it to come to this, and he was sorry. Since noon he had been watching his feet rather than watching the way ahead. Out here even the devil-grass had grown stunted and yellow. The hardpan had disintegrated in places to mere rubble. The mountains were not noticeably clearer, although sixteen days had passed since he had left the hut of the last homesteader, a loony-sane young man on the edge of the desert. He had had a raven, the gunslinger remembered, but he couldn't remember the raven's name.

He watched his feet move up and down, listened to the nonsense rhyme sing itself into a pitiful garble in his mind, and wondered when he would fall down for the first time. He didn't want to fall, even though there was no one to see him. It was a matter of pride. A gunslinger knows pride — that invisible bone that keeps the neck stiff.

He stopped and looked up suddenly. It made his head buzz and for a moment his whole body seemed to float. The mountains dreamed against the far horizon. But there was something else up ahead, something much closer. Perhaps only five miles away. He squinted at it, but his eyes were sandblasted and going glareblind. He shook his head and began to walk again. The rhyme circled and buzzed. About an hour later he fell down and skinned his hands. He looked at the tiny beads of blood on his flaked skin with unbelief. The blood looked no thinner; it looked mutely viable. It seemed almost as smug as the desert. He dashed the drops away, hating them blindly. Smug? Why not? The blood was not thirsty. The blood was being served. The blood was being made sacrifice unto. Blood sacrifice. All the blood needed to do was run ... and run ... and run.

He looked at the splotches that had

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landed on the hardpan and watched as they were sucked up with uncanny suddenness. How do you like that blood? How does that grab you?

O Jesus, *you're far gone.*

He got up, holding his hands to his chest, and the thing he had seen earlier was almost in front of him, startling a cry out of him — a dust-choked crow-croak. It was a building. No; two buildings, surrounded by a fallen rail fence. The wood seemed old, fragile to the point of elvishness; it was wood being transmogrified into sand. One of the buildings had been a stable — the shape was clear and unmistakable. The other was a house, or an inn. A way station for the coach line. The tottering sand-house (the wind had crusted the wood with grit until it looked like a sand castle that the sun had beat upon at low tide and hardened to a temporary abode) cast a thin line of shadow, and someone sat in the shadow, leaning against the building. And the building seemed to lean with the burden of his weight.

Him, then. At last. The man in black.

The gunslinger stood with his hands to his chest, unaware of his declamatory posture, and gawped. And instead of the tremendous, winging excitement he had expected (or perhaps fear, or awe), there was nothing but the dim, atavistic guilt for the sudden, raging hate of his own blood moments earlier and the endless ring-a-rosy of the childhood song:

...the rain in Spain...

He moved forward, drawing one gun.

...falls mainly on the plain.

He came the last quarter mile at the run, not trying to hide himself; there was nothing to hide behind. His short shadow raced him. He was not aware that his face had become a gray and grinning deathmask of exhaustion; he was aware of nothing but the figure in the shadow. It did not occur to him until later that the figure might even have been dead.

He kicked through one of the leaning fence rails (it broke in two without a sound, almost apologetically) and lunged across the dazzled and silent stable yard, bringing the gun up.

"You're covered! You're covered! You're —"

The figure moved restlessly and stood up. The gunslinger thought: My God, he is worn away to nothing, what's happened to him? Because the man in black had shrunk two full feet and his hair had gone white.

He paused, struck dumb, his head buzzing tunelessly. His heart was racing at a lunatic rate and he thought, I'm dying right here—

He sucked the white-hot air into his lungs and hung his head for a moment. When he raised it again, he saw it wasn't the man in black but a small boy with sun-bleached hair, regarding him with eyes that did not even seem interested. The gunslinger stared at him blankly and then shook his head in

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negation. But the boy survived his refusal to believe; he was still there, wearing blue jeans with a patch on one knee and a plain brown shirt of rough weave.

The gunslinger shook his head again and started for the stable with his head lowered, gun still in hand. He couldn't think yet. His head was filled with motes and there was a huge, thrumming ache building in it.

The inside of the stable was silent and dark and exploding with heat. The gunslinger stared around himself with huge, floating walleyes. He made a drunken about-face and saw the boy standing in the ruined doorway, staring at him. A huge lancet of pain slipped dreamily into his head, cutting from temple to temple, dividing his brain like an orange. He reholstered his gun, swayed, put out his hands as if to ward off phantoms, and fell over on his face.

When he woke up, he was on his back, and there was a pile of incredible light, odorless hay beneath his head. The boy had not been able to move him, but he had made him reasonably comfortable. And he was cool. He looked down at himself and saw that his shirt was dark with moisture. He licked at his face and tasted water. He blinked at it.

The boy was hunkered down beside him. When he saw the gunslinger's eyes were open, he reached behind him and gave the gunslinger a dented tin can filled with water. He grasped it with trembling hands and allowed himself to drink a little — just a little. When that was down and sitting in his belly, he drank a little more. Then he spilled the rest over his face and made shocked blowing noises. The boy's pretty lips curved in a solemn little smile.

"Want something to eat?" The boy asked.

"Not yet," the gunslinger said. There was still a sick ache in his head from the sunstroke, and the water sat uneasily in his stomach, as if it did not know where to go. "Who are you?"

"My name is John Chambers. You can call me Jake."

The gunslinger sat up, and the sick ache became hard and immediate. He leaned forward and lost a brief struggle with his stomach.

"There's more," Jake said. He took the can and walked toward the rear of the stable. He paused and smiled back at the gunslinger uncertainly. The gunslinger nodded at him and then put his head down and propped it with his hands. The boy was well-made, handsome, perhaps nine. There had been a shadow on his face, but there were shadows on all faces now.

A strange, thumping hum began at the rear of the stable, and the gunslinger raised his head alertly, hands going to gunbutts. The sound lasted for perhaps fifteen seconds and then quit. The boy came back with the can — filled now.

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The gunslinger drank sparingly again, and this time it was a little better. The ache in his head was fading.

"I didn't know what to do with you when you fell down," Jake said. "For a couple of seconds there, I thought you were going to shoot me."

"I thought you were somebody else."

"The priest?"

The gunslinger looked up sharply. "What priest?"

The boy looked at him, frowning lightly. "The priest. He camped in the yard. I was in the house over there. I didn't like him, so I didn't come out. He came in the night and went on the next day. I would have hidden from you, but I was sleepin' when you came." He looked darkly over the gunslinger's head. "I don't like people. They fuck me up."

"What did the priest look like?"

The boy shrugged. "Like a priest. He was wearing black things."

"Like a hood and a cassock?"

"What's a cassock?"

"A robe."

The boy nodded. "A robe and a hood."

The gunslinger leaned forward, and something in his face made the boy recoil a little. "How long ago?"

"I—I—"

Patiently, the gunslinger said, "I'm not going to hurt you."

"I don't know. I can't remember time. Every day is the same."

For the first time the gunslinger wondered consciously how the boy had come to this place, with dry and man-killing leagues of desert all around it. But he would not make it his concern; not yet, at least. "Make a guess. Long ago?"

"No. Not long. I haven't been here long."

The fire lit in him again. He grabbed the can and drank from it with hands that trembled the smallest bit. A snatch of the cradle song recurred, but this time, instead of his mother's face, he saw the scarred face of Alice, who had been his woman in the now-defunct town of Tull. "How long? A week? Two? three?"

The boy looked at him distractedly. "Yes."

"Which one?"

"A week. Or two. I didn't come out. He didn't even drink. I thought he might be the ghost of a priest. I was scared. I've been scared almost all the time." His face quivered like crystal on the edge of the ultimate, destructive high note. "He didn't even build a fire. He just sat there. I don't even know if he went to sleep."

Close! He was closer than he had ever been. In spite of his extreme dehydration, his hands felt faintly moist; greasy. He thought: I've been playing above my head all this time.

"There's some dried meat," the boy said.

"All right." The gunslinger nodded. "Good."

The boy got up to fetch it, his knees

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popping slightly. He made a fine straight figure. The desert had not yet sapped him. His arms were thin, but the skin, although tanned, had not dried and cracked. He's got juice, the gunslinger thought. He drank from the can again. He's got juice and he didn't come from this place.

Jake came back with a pile of dried jerky on what looked like a sun-scoured breadboard. The meat was tough, stringy, and salty enough to make the cankered lining of the gunslinger's mouth sing. He ate and drank until he felt logy, and then settled back. The boy ate only a little.

The gunslinger regarded him steadily, and the boy looked back at him. "Where did you come from, Jake?" He asked finally.

"I don't know." The boy frowned. "I did know. I knew when I came here, but it's all fuzzy now, like a bad dream when you wake up. I have lots of bad dreams."

"Did somebody bring you?"

"No," the boy said. "I was just here."

"You're not making any sense," the gunslinger said flatly.

Quite suddenly the boy seemed on the verge of tears. "I can't help it. I was just here. And now you'll go away and I'll starve because you ate up almost all my food. I didn't ask to be here. I don't like it. It's spooky."

"Don't feel so sorry for yourself. Make do."

"I didn't ask to be here," the boy repeated with a kind of bewildered defiance.

The gunslinger ate another piece of the meat, chewing the salt out of it before swallowing. The boy had become a part of it, and the gunslinger was convinced he told the truth — he had not asked for it. It was too bad. He himself ... *he* had asked for it. But he had not asked for the game to become this dirty. He had not asked to be allowed to turn his guns on the unarmed populace of Tull; had not asked to shoot Allie, her face marked by that strange, shining scar; had not asked to be faced with a choice between the obsession of his duty and his quest and criminal amorality. The man in black had begun to pull bad strings in his desperation, if it was the man in black who had pulled his particular string. It was not fair to ring in innocent bystanders and make them speak lines they didn't understand on a strange stage. Allie, he thought, Allie at least had been into the world in her own self-illusory way. But this *boy* ... this God-damned *boy*....

"Tell me what you can remember," he told Jake.

"It's only a little. It doesn't seem to make any sense anymore."

"Tell me. Maybe I can pick up the sense."

"There was a place ... the one before this one. A high place with lots of rooms and a patio where you could look at tall buildings and water. There

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was a statue that stood in the water."

"A statue in the water?"

"Yes. A lady with a crown and a torch."

"Are you making this up?"

"I guess I must be," the boy said hopelessly. "There were things to ride in on the streets. Big ones and little ones. Yellow ones. A lot of yellow ones. I walked to school. There were cement paths beside the streets. Windows to look in and more statues wearing clothes. The statues sold the clothes. I know it sounds crazy, but the statues sold the clothes."

The gunslinger shook his head and looked for a lie on the boy's face. He saw none.

"I walked to school," the boy repeated fixedly. "And I had a —" His eyes tilted closed and his lips moved gropingly. "—a brown...book...bag. I carried a lunch. And I wore—" the groping again, agonized groping "—a tie."

"A what?"

"I don't know." The boy's fingers made a slow, unconscious clinching motion at his throat—a gesture the gunslinger associated with hanging. "I don't know. It's just all gone." And he looked away.

"May I put you to sleep?" The gunslinger asked.

"I'm not sleepy."

"I can make you sleepy, and I can make you remember."

Doubtfully, Jake asked, "How could you do that?"

"With this."

The gunslinger removed one of the shells from his gunbelt and twirled it in his fingers. The movement was dexterous, as flowing as oil. The shell cartwheeled effortlessly from thumb and index and index and second, to second and ring, to ring and pinky. It popped out of sight and reappeared; seemed to float briefly, and then reversed. The shell walked across the gunslinger's fingers. The fingers themselves moved like a beaded curtain in a breeze. The boy watched, his initial doubt replaced with plain delight, then by raptness, then by a dawning mute blankness. The eyes slipped shut. The shell danced back and forth. Jake's eyes opened again, caught the steady, limpid dance between the gunslinger's fingers for a while longer, and then his eyes closed once more. The gunslinger continued, but Jake's eyes did not open again. The boy breathed with steady, bovine calmness. Was this part of it? Yes. There was a certain beauty, a logic, like the lacy frettings that fringe hard blue ice-packs. He seemed to hear the sound of wind-chimes. Not for the first time the gunslinger tasted the smooth, loden taste of soul-sickness. The shell in his fingers, manipulated with such unknown grace, was suddenly undead, horrific, the spoor of a monster. He dropped it into his palm and closed it into a fist with painful force. There were such things as rape in the world. Rape and murder and unspeakable practices, and all of them were for the

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good, the bloody good, for the myth, for the grail, for the Tower. Ah, the Tower stood somewhere, rearing its black bulk to the sky, and in his desert-scoured ears, the gunslinger heard the faint sweet sound of wind-chimes.

"Where are you?" he asked.

Jake Chambers is going downstairs with his bookbag. There is Earth Science, there is Economic Geography, there is a notepad, a pencil, a lunch his mother's cook, Mrs. Greta Shaw, has made for him in the chrome-and-formica kitchen where a fan whirrs eternally, sucking up alien odors. In his lunch sack he has a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, a balogna, lettuce, and onion sandwich, and four Oreo cookies. His parents do not hate him, but they seem to have overlooked him. They have abdicated and left him to Mrs. Greta Shaw, to nannies, to a tutor in the summer and The School (which is Private and Nice, and most of all, White) the rest of the time. None of these people have ever pretended to be more than what they are — professional people, the best in their fields. None have folded him to a particularly warm bosom as usually happens in the historical novels his mother reads and which Jake has dipped into, looking for the "hot parts." Hysterical novels, his father sometimes calls them, and sometimes, "bodice-rippers." You should talk, his mother says with infinite scorn from behind some closed door where Jake listens. His father works for The Network, and Jake could pick him out of a line-up. Probably.

Jake does not know that he hates all these professional people, but he does. People have always bewildered him. He likes stairs and will not use the self-service elevator in his building. His mother, who is scrawny in a sexy way, often goes to bed with sick friends.

Now he is on the street, Jake Chambers is on the street, he has "hit the bricks." He is clean and well-mannered, comely, sensitive. He has no friends; only acquaintances. He has never bothered to think about this, but it hurts him. He does not know or understand that a long association with professional people has caused him to take many of their traits. Mrs. Greta Shaw makes very professional sandwiches. She quarters them and cuts off the breadcrusts so that when he eats in the gym period four he looks like he ought to be at a cocktail party with a drink in his other hand instead of a sports novel from the school library. His father makes a great deal of money because he is a master of "the kill" — that is, placing a stronger show on his Network against a weaker show on a rival Network. His father smokes four packs of cigarettes a day. His father does not cough, but he has a hard grin, like the steak knives they sell in supermarkets.

Down the street. His mother leaves cab fare, but he walks every day it doesn't rain, swinging his bookbag, a

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small boy who looks very American with his blonde hair and blue eyes. Girls have already begun to notice him (with their mother's approval), and he does not shy away with skittish little-boy arrogance. He talks to them with unknowing professionalism and puzzles them away. He likes geography and bowls in the afternoon. His father owns stock in a company that makes automatic pin-setting machinery, but the bowling alley Jake patronizes does not use his father's brand. He does not think he has thought about this, but he has.

Walking down the street, he passes Brendio's where the models stand dressed in fur coats, in six-button Edwardian suits, some in nothing at all; some are "barenaked." These models — these mannequins — are perfectly professional, and he hates all professionalism. He is too young to have learned to hate himself yet, but that seed is already there; it has been planted in the bitter cleft of his heart.

He comes to the corner and stands with his bookbag at his side. Traffic roars by — grunting busses, taxis, Volkswagens, a large truck. He is just a boy, but not average, and he sees the man who kills him out of the corner of his eye. It is the man in black, and he doesn't see the face, only the swirling robe, the outstretched hands. He falls into the street with his arms outstretched, not letting go of the bookbag which contains Mrs. Greta Shaw's extremely professional lunch. There is a brief glance through a polarized windshield at the horrified face of a businessman wearing a dark-blue hat in the band of which is a small, jaunty feather. An old woman on the far curb screams — she is wearing a black hat with a net. Nothing jaunty about that black net; it is like a mourner's veil. Jake feels nothing but surprise and his usual sense of headlong bewilderment — is this how it ends? He lands hard in the street and looks at an asphalt-sealed crack some two inches from his eyes. The bookbag is jolted from his hand. He is wondering if he has skinned his knees when the car of the businessman wearing the blue hat with the jaunty feather passes over him. It is a big blue 1976 Cadillac with sixteen-inch wheels. It is almost exactly the same color as the businessman's hat. It breaks Jake's back, mushes his stomach, and sends blood from his mouth in a high-pressure jet. He turns his head and sees the Cadillac's flaming taillights and smoke spurting from beneath its locked rear wheels. The car has also run over his bookbag and left a wide black tread on it. He turns his head the other way and sees a large yellow Ford screaming to a stop inches from his body. A black fellow who has been selling pretzels and sodas from a pushcart is coming toward him on the run. Blood runs from Jake's nose, ears, eyes, rectum. His genitals have been squashed. He wonders irritably how badly he has skinned his knees. Now the driver of the Cadillac is running toward him, babbling. Some-

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where a terrible, calm voice, the voice of doom, says: "I am a priest. Let me through. An Act of Contrition—"

He sees the black robe and knows sudden horror. It is him, the man in black. He turns his face away with the last of his strength. Somewhere a radio is playing a song by the rock group Kiss. He sees his own hand trailing on the pavement, small, white, shapely. He has never bitten his nails.

Looking at his hand, Jake dies.

The gunslinger sat in frowning thought. He was tired and his body ached and the thoughts came with aggravating slowness. Across from him the amazing boy slept with his hands folded in his lap, still breathing calmly. He had told his tale without much emotion, although his voice had trembled near the end, when he had come to the part about the "priest" and the "Act of Contrition." He had not, of course, told the gunslinger about his family and his own sense of bewildered dichotomy, but that had seeped through anyway — enough had seeped through to make out its shape. The fact that there had never been such a city as the boy described (or, if so, it had only existed in the myth of prehistory) was not the most upsetting part of the story, but it was disturbing. It was all disturbing. The gunslinger was afraid of the implications.

"Jake?"

"Uh-huh?"

"Do you want to remember this when you wake up, or forget it?"

"Forget it," the boy said promptly. "I bled."

"All right. You're going to sleep, understand? Go ahead and lie over."

Jake laid over, looking small and peaceful and harmless. The gunslinger did not believe he was harmless. There was a deadly feeling about him, and the stink of predestination. He didn't like the feeling, but he liked the boy. He liked him a great deal.

"Jake?"

"Shh. I want to sleep."

"Yes. And when you wake up you won't remember any of this."

"'Kay."

The gunslinger watched him for a brief time, thinking of his own boyhood, which usually seemed to have happened to another person — to a person who had jumped through some osmotic lens and become someone else — but which now seemed poignantly close. It was very hot in the stable of the way station, and he carefully drank some more water. He got up and walked to the back of the building, pausing to look into one of the horse stalls. There was a small pile of white hay in the corner, and a neatly folded blanket, but there was no smell of horse. There was no smell of anything in the stable. The sun had bled away every smell and left nothing. The air was perfectly neutral.

At the back of the stable was a small, dark room with a stainless steel machine in the center. It was untouched by rust or rot. It looked like a butter

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churn. At the left, a chrome pipe jutted from it, terminating over a drain in the floor. The gunslinger had seen pumps like it in other dry places, but never one so big. He could not contemplate how deep they must have drilled before they struck water, secret and forever black under the desert.

Why hadn't they removed the pump when the way station had been abandoned?

Demons, perhaps.

He shuddered abruptly, an abrupt twisting of his back. Heatflesh poked out on his skin, then receded. He went to the control switch and pushed the ON button. The machine began to hum. After perhaps half a minute, a stream of cool, clear water belched from the pipe and went down the drain to be recirculated. Perhaps three gallons flowed out of the pipe before the pump shut itself down with a final click. It was a thing as alien to this place and time as true love, and yet as concrete as a Judgment, a silent reminder of the time when the world had not yet moved on. It probably ran on an atomic slug, as there was no electricity within a thousand miles of here and even dry batteries would have lost their charge long ago. The gunslinger didn't like it.

He went back and sat down beside the boy, who had put one hand under his cheek. Nice-looking boy. The gunslinger drank some more water and crossed his legs so he was sitting Indian fashion. The boy, like the squatter on the edge of the desert who kept the bird (Zoltan, the gunslinger remembered abruptly, the bird's name was Zoltan), had lost his sense of time, but the fact that the man in black was closer seemed beyond doubt. Not for the first time, the gunslinger wondered if the man in black was letting him catch up for some reason of his own. Perhaps the gunslinger was playing into his hands. He tried to imagine what the confrontation might be like, and could not.

He was very hot, but he no longer felt sick. The nursery rhyme occurred to him again, but this time instead of his mother, he thought of Cort—Cort, with his face hemstitched with the scars of bricks and bullets and blunt instruments. The scars of war. He wondered if Cort had ever had a love to match those monumental scars. He doubted it. He thought of Aileen, and of Marten, that incomplete enchanter.

The gunslinger was not a man to dwell on the past; only a shadowy conception of the future and of his own emotional make-up saved him from being a creature without imagination, a dullard. His present run of thought therefore rather amazed him. Each name called up others — Cuthbert, Paul, the old man Jonas; and Susan, the lovely girl at the window.

The piano player in Tull (also dead, all dead in Tull, and by his hand) had been fond of the old songs, and the gunslinger hummed one tunelessly under his breath:

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Love o love o careless love
See what careless love has done.

The gunslinger laughed, bemused. *I am the last of that green and warm-hued world.* And for all his nostalgia, he felt no self-pity. The world had moved on mercilessly, but his legs were still strong, and the man in black was closer. The gunslinger nodded out.

When he woke up it was almost dark and the boy was gone.

The gunslinger got up, hearing his joints pop, and went to the stable door. There was a small flame dancing in darkness on the porch of the inn. He walked toward it, his shadow long and black and trailing in the ochre light of the sunset.

Jake was sitting by a kerosene lamp. "The oil was in a drum," he said, "but I was scared to burn it in the house. Everything's so dry—"

"You did just right." The gunslinger sat down, seeing but not thinking about the dust of years that puffed up around his rump. The flame from the lamp shadowed the boy's face with delicate tones. The gunslinger produced his poke and rolled a cigarette.

"We have to talk," he said.

Jake nodded.

"I guess you know I'm on the prod for that man you saw."

"Are you going to kill him?"

"I don't know. I have to make him tell me something. I may have to make him take me someplace."

"Where?"

"To find a tower," the gunslinger said. He held his cigarette over the chimney of the lamp and drew on it; the smoke drifted away on the rising night breeze. Jake watched it. His face showed neither fear nor curiosity, certainly not enthusiasm.

"So I'm going on tomorrow," the gunslinger said. "You'll have to come with me. How much of that meat is left?"

"Only a handful."

"Corn?"

"A little."

The gunslinger nodded. "Is there a cellar?"

"Yes." Jake looked at him. The pupils of his eyes had grown to a huge, fragile size. "You pull up on a ring in the floor, but I didn't go down. I was afraid the ladder would break and I wouldn't be able to get up again. And it smells bad. It's the only thing around here that smells at all."

"We'll get up early and see if there's anything down there worth taking. Then we'll bug out."

"All right." The boy paused and then said, "I'm glad I didn't kill you when you were sleeping. I had a pitchfork and I thought about doing it. But I didn't, and now I won't have to be afraid to go to sleep."

"What would you be afraid of?"

The boy looked at him ominously. "Spooks. Of *him* coming back."

"The man in black," the gunslinger said. Not a question.

"Yes. Is he a bad man?"

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"That depends on where you're standing," the gunslinger said absently. He got up and pitched his cigarette out onto the hardpan. "I'm going to sleep."

The boy looked at him timidly. "Can I sleep in the stable with you?"

"Of course."

The gunslinger stood on the steps, looking up, and the boy joined him. Polaris was up there, and Mars. It seemed to the gunslinger that, if he closed his eyes he would be able to hear the croaking of the first spring peepers, smell the green and almost-summer smell of the court lawns after their first cutting (and hear, perhaps, the indolent click of croquet balls as the ladies of the East Wing, attired only in their shifts as dusk glimmered toward dark, played at Points), could almost see Aileen as she came through the break in the hedges —

It was not like him to think so much of the past.

He turned back and picked up the lamp. "Let's go to sleep," he said.

They crossed to the stable together.

The next morning he explored the cellar.

Jake was right; it smelled bad. It had a wet, swampy smell that made the gunslinger feel nauseous and a little lightheaded after the antiseptic odorlessness of the desert and the stable. The cellar smelled of cabbages and turnips and potatoes with long, sightless eyes gone to everlasting rot. The ladder, however, seemed quite sturdy, and he climbed down.

The floor was earthen, and his head almost touched the overhead beams. Down here spiders still lived, disturbingly big ones with mottled gray bodies. Many of them had mutated. Some had eyes on stalks, some had what might have been as many as sixteen legs.

The gunslinger peered around and waited for his nighteyes.

"You all right?" Jake called down nervously.

"Yes. He focused on the corner. "There are cans. Wait."

He went carefully to the corner, ducking his head. There was an old box with one side folded down. The cans were vegetables — green beans, yellow beans ... and three cans of corned beef.

He scooped up an armload and went back to the ladder. He climbed halfway up and handed them to Jake, who knealt to receive them. He went back for more.

It was on the third trip that he heard the groaning in the foundations.

He turned, looked, and felt a kind of dreamy terror wash over him, a feeling both languid and repellent, like sex in the water — one drowning within another.

The foundation was composed of huge sandstone blocks that had probably been evenly cornered when the way station was new, but which were now at every zigzag, drunken angle. It

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made the wall look as if it were inscribed with strange, meandering hieroglyphics. And from the joining of two of these abtruse cracks, a thin spill of sand was running, as if something on the other side was digging itself through with slobbering, agonized intensity.

The groaning rose and fell, becoming louder, until the whole cellar was full of the sound, an abstract noise of ripping pain and dreadful effort.

"Come up!" Jake screamed. "O Jesus, mister, come up!"

"Go away," the gunslinger said calmly.

"Come up!" Jake screamed again.

The gunslinger did not answer. He pulled leather with his right hand.

There was a hole in the wall now, a hole as big as a coin. He could hear, through the curtain of his own terror, Jake's pattering feet as the boy ran. Then the spill of sand stopped. The groaning ceased, but there was a sound of steady, labored breathing.

"Who are you?" The gunslinger asked.

No answer.

And in the High Speech, his voice filling with the old thunder of command, Roland demanded: "Who are you, Demon? Speak, if you would speak. My time is short; my hands lose patience."

"Go slow," a dragging, clotted voice said from within the wall. And the gunslinger felt the dreamlike terror deepen and grow almost solid. It was the voice of Alice, the woman he had stayed with in the town of Tull. But she was dead; he had seen her go down himself, a bullet hole between her eyes. Fathoms seemed to swim by his eyes, descending. "Go slow past the Drawers, gunslinger. While you travel with the boy, the man in black travels with your soul in his pocket."

"What do you mean? Speak on!"

But the breathing was gone.

The gunslinger stood for a moment, frozen, and then one of the huge spiders dropped on his arm and scrambled frantically up to his shoulder. With an involuntary grunt he brushed it away and got his feet moving. He did not want to do it, but custom was strict, inviolable. The dead from the dead, as the old proverb has it; only a corpse may speak. He went to the hole and punched at it. The sandstone crumbled easily at the edges, and with a bare stiffening of muscles, he thrust his hand through the wall.

And touched something solid, with raised and fretted knobs. He drew it out. He held a jawbone, rotted at the far hinge. The teeth leaned this way and that.

"All right," he said softly. He thrust it rudely into his back pocket and went back up the ladder, carrying the last cans awkwardly. He left the trapdoor open. The sun would get in and kill the spiders.

Jake was halfway across the stable yard, cowering on the cracked, rubbly hardpan. He screamed when he saw

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the gunslinger, backed away a step or two, and then ran to him, crying.

"I thought it got you, that it got you, I thought —"

"It didn't." He held the boy to him, feeling his face, hot against his chest, and his hands, dry against his ribcage. It occurred to him later that this was when he began to love the boy — which was, of course, what the man in black must have planned all along.

"Was it a demon?" The voice was muffled.

"Yes. A speaking-demon. We don't have to go back there anymore. Come on."

They went to the stable, and the gunslinger made a rough pack from the blanket he had slept under — it was hot and prickly, but there was nothing else. That done, he filled the waterbags from the pump.

"You carry one of the waterbags," the gunslinger said. "Wear it around your shoulders — like a fakir carries his snake. See?"

"Yes." The boy looked up at him worshipfully. He slung one of the bags.

"Is it too heavy?"

"No. It's fine."

"Tell me the truth, now. I can't carry you if you get a sunstroke."

"I won't have a sunstroke. I'll be okay."

The gunslinger nodded.

"We're going to the mountains, aren't we?"

"Yes."

They walked out into the steady smash of the sun. Jake, his head as high as the swing of the gunslinger's elbows, walked to his right and a little ahead, the rawhide-wrapped ends of the waterbag hanging nearly to his shins. The gunslinger had crisscrossed two more waterbags across his shoulders and carried the sling of food in his armpit, his left arm holding it against his body.

They passed through the far gate of the way station and found the blurred ruts of the stage track again. They had walked perhaps fifteen minutes when Jake turned around and waved at the two buildings. They seemed to huddle in the titanic space of the desert.

"Goodbye!" Jake cried. "Goodbye!"

They walked. The stage track breasted a frozen sand drumlin, and when the gunslinger looked around, the way station was gone. Once again there was the desert, and that only.

They were three days out of the way station; the mountains were deceptively clear now. They could see the rise of the desert into foothills, the first naked slopes, the bedrock bursting through the skin of the earth in sullen, eroded triumph. Further up, the land gentled off briefly again, and for the first time in months or years the gunslinger could see green — real, living green. Grass, dwarf spruces, perhaps even willows, all fed by snow runoff from further up. Beyond that

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the rock took over again, rising in cyclopean, tumbled splendor to the blinding snowcaps. Off to the left, a huge slash showed the way to the smaller, eroded sandstone cliffs and mesas and buttes on the far side. This draw was obscured in the almost continual gray membrane of showers. At night, Jake would sit fascinated for the few minutes before he fell into sleep, watching the brilliant swordplay of the far-off lightning, white and purple, startling in the clarity of the night air.

The boy was fine on the trail. He was tough, but more than that, he seemed to fight exhaustion with a calm and professional reservoir of will which the gunslinger fully appreciated. He did not talk much and he did not ask questions, not even about the jawbone, which the gunslinger turned over and over in his hands during his evening smoke. He caught a sense that the boy felt highly flattered by the gunslinger's companionship — perhaps even exalted by it — and this disturbed him. The boy had been placed in his path — *While you travel with the boy, the man in black travels with your soul in his pocket* — and the fact that Jake was not slowing him down only opened the way to more sinister possibilities.

They passed the symmetrical campfire leavings of the man in black at regular intervals, and it seemed to the gunslinger that these leavings were much fresher now. On the third night, the gunslinger was sure that he could see the distant spark of another campfire, somewhere in the first rising swell of the foothills.

Near two o'clock on the fourth day out from the way station, Jake reeled and almost fell.

"Here, sit down," the gunslinger said.

"No, I'm okay."

"Sit down."

The boy sat obediently. The gunslinger squatted close by, so Jake would be in his shadow.

"Drink."

"I'm not supposed to until —"

"Drink."

The boy drank, three swallows. The gunslinger wet the tail of the blanket, which was lighter now, and applied the damp fabric to the boy's wrists and forehead, which were feverdry.

"From now on we rest every afternoon at this time. Fifteen minutes. Do you want to sleep?"

"No." The boy looked at him with shame. The gunslinger looked back blandly. In an abstracted way he withdrew one of the bullets from his belt and began to twirl it between his fingers. The boy watched, fascinated.

"That's neat," he said.

The gunslinger nodded. "Sure it is." he paused. "When I was your age, I lived in a walled city, did I tell you that?"

The boy shook his head sleepily.

"Sure. And there was an evil man —"

"The priest?"

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"No," the gunslinger said, "but the two of them had some relationship, I think now. Maybe even half-brothers. Marten was a wizard ... like Merlin. Do they tell of Merlin where you come from, Jake?"

"Merlin and Arthur and the knights of the round table," Jake said dreamily.

The gunslinger felt a nasty jolt go through him. "Yes," he said. "I was very young,...."

But the boy was asleep sitting up, his hands folded neatly in his lap.

"When I snap my fingers, you'll wake up. You'll be rested and fresh. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Lay over, then."

The gunslinger got makings from his poke and rolled a cigarette. There was something missing. He searched for it in his dilligent, careful way and located it. The missing thing was that maddening sense of hurry, the feeling that he might be left behind at any time, that the trail would die out and he would be left with only a broken piece of string. All that was gone now, and the gunslinger was slowly becoming sure that the man in black wanted to be caught.

What would follow?

The question was too vague to catch his interest. Cuthbert would have found interest in it, lively interest, but Cuthbert was gone, and the gunslinger could only go forward in the way he knew.

He watched the boy as he smoked, and his mind turned back on Cuthbert, who had always laughed — to his death he had gone laughing — and Cort, who never laughed, and on Marten, who sometimes smiled — a thin, silent smile that had its own disquieting gleam ... like an eye that slips open in the dark and discloses blood. And there had been the falcon, of course. The falcon was named David, after the legend of the boy with the sling. David, he was quite sure, knew nothing but the need for murder, rending, and terror. Like the gunslinger himself, David was no dilettante; he played the center of the court.

Perhaps, though, in some final accounting, David the falcon had been closer to Marten than to anyone else ... and perhaps his mother, Gabrielle, had known it.

The gunslinger's stomach seemed to rise painfully against his heart, but his face didn't change. He watched the smoke of his cigarette rise into the hot desert air and disappear, and his mind went back.

II

The sky was white, perfectly white, and the smell of rain was in the air. The smell of hedges and growing green was strong and sweet. It was deep spring.

David sat on Cuthbert's arm, a small engine of destruction with bright golden eyes that glared outward at

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nothing. The rawhide leash attached to his jesses was looped carelessly about Cuthbert's arm.

Cort stood aside from the two boys, a silent figure in patched leather trousers and a green cotton shirt that had been cinched high with his old, wide infantry belt. The green of his shirt merged with the hedges and the rolling turf of the Back Courts, where the ladies had not yet begun to play at Points.

"Get ready," Roland whispered to Cuthbert.

"We're ready," Cuthbert said confidently. "Aren't we, Davey?"

They spoke the low speech, the language of both scullions and squires; the day when they would be allowed to use their own tongue in the presence of others was still far. "It's a beautiful day for it. Can you smell the rain? It's—"

Cort abruptly raised the trap in his hands and let the side fall open. The dove was out and up, trying for the sky in a quick, fluttering blast of its wings. Cuthbert pulled the leash; but he was slow; the hawk was already up and his takeoff was awkward. With a brief twitch of its wings the hawk had recovered. It struck upward, gaining altitude over the dove, moving bullet-swift.

Cort walked over to where the boys stood, casually, and swung his huge and twisted fist at Cuthbert's ear. The boy fell over without a sound, although his lips writhed back from his gums. A trickle of blood flowed slowly from his ear and onto the rich green grass.

"You were slow," he said.

Cuthbert was struggling to his feet. "I'm sorry, Cort. It's just that I—"

Cort swung again, and Cuthbert fell over again. The blood flowed more swiftly now.

"Speak the High Speech," he said softly. His voice was flat, with a slight, drunken rasp. "Speak your act of contrition in the speech of civilization for which better men than you will ever be have died, maggot."

Cuthbert was getting up again. Tears stood brightly in his eyes, but his lips were pressed tightly together in a bright line of hate which did not quiver.

"I grieve," Cuthbert said in a voice of breathless control. "I have forgotten the face of my father, whose guns I hope someday to bear."

"That's right, brat," Cort said. "You'll consider what you did wrong, and bookend your reflections with hunger. No supper. No breakfast."

"Look!" Roland cried. He pointed up.

The hawk had climbed above the soaring dove. It glided for a moment, its stubby, muscular wings outstretched and without movement on the still, white spring air. Then it folded its wings and dropped like a stone. The two bodies came together, and for a moment Roland fancied he could see blood in the air ... but it might have

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been his imagination. The hawk gave a brief scream of triumph. The dove fluttered, twisting, to the ground, and Roland ran toward the kill, leaving Cort and the chastened Cuthbert behind him.

The hawk had landed beside its prey and was complacently tearing into its plump white breast. A few feathers seesawed slowly downward.

"David!" The boy yelled, and tossed the hawk a piece of rabbit flesh from his poke. The hawk caught it on the fly, ingested it with an upward shaking of its back and throat, and Roland attempted to re-leash the bird.

The hawk whirled, almost absentmindedly, and ripped skin from Roland's arm in a long, dangling gash. Then it went back to its meal.

With a grunt, Roland looped the leash again, this time catching David's diving, slashing beak on the leather gauntlet he wore. He gave the hawk another piece of meat, then hooded it. Docile, David climbed onto his wrist.

He stood up proudly, the hawk on his arm.

"What's this?" Cort asked, pointing to the dripping slash on Roland's forearm. The boy stationed himself to receive the blow, locking his throat against any possible cry, but no blow fell.

"He struck me," Roland said.

"You pissed him off," Cort said. "The hawk does not fear you, boy, and the hawk never will. The hawk is God's gunslinger."

Roland merely looked at Cort. He was not an imaginative boy, and if Cort had intended to imply a moral, it was lost on him; he was pragmatic enough to believe that it might have been one of the few foolish statements he had ever heard Cort make.

Cuthbert came up behind them and stuck his tongue out at Cort, safely on his blind side. Roland did not smile, but nodded to him.

"Go in now," Cort said, taking the hawk. He pointed at Cuthbert. "But remember your reflection, maggot. and your fast. Tonight and tomorrow morning."

"Yes," Cuthbert said, stiltedly formal now. "Thank you for this instructive day."

"You learn," Cort said, "but your tongue has a bad habit of lolling from your stupid mouth when your instructor's back is turned. Mayhap the day will come when it and you will learn their respective places." He struck Cuthbert again, this time solidly between the eyes and hard enough so that Roland heard a dull thud — the sound a mallet makes when a scullion taps a keg of beer. Cuthbert fell backward onto the lawn, his eyes cloudly and dazed at first. Then they cleared and he stared burningly up at Cort, his hatred unveiled, a pinprick as bright as the dove's blood in the center of each eye.

Cuthbert nodded and parted his lips in a scarifying smile that Roland had never seen.

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"Then there's hope for you," Cort said. "When you think you can, you come for me, maggot."

"How did you know?" Cuthbert said between his teeth.

Cort turned toward Roland so swiftly that Roland almost fell back a step — and then both of them would have been on the grass, decorating the new green with their blood. "I saw it reflected in this maggot's eyes," he said. "Remember it, Cuthbert. Last lesson for today."

Cuthbert nodded again, the same frightening smile on his face. "I grieve," he said. "I have forgotten the face —"

"Cut that shit," Cort said, losing interest. He turned to Roland. "Go on, now. The both of you. If I have to look at your stupid maggot faces any longer I'll puke my guts."

"Come on," Roland said.

Cuthbert shook his head to clear it and got to his feet. Cort was already walking down the hill in his squat, bowlegged stride, looking powerful and somehow prehistoric. The shaved and grizzled spot at the top of his head loomed at a slant, hunched.

"I'll kill the son of a bitch," Cuthbert said, still smiling. A large goose egg, purple and knotted, was rising mystically on his forehead.

"Not you or me," Roland said, suddenly bursting into a grin. "You can have supper in the west kitchen with me. Cook will give us some."

"He'll tell Cort."

"He's no friend of Cort's," Roland said, and then shrugged. "And what if he did?"

Cuthbert grinned back. "Sure. Right. I always wanted to know how the world looked when your head was on backwards and upside down."

They started back together over the green lawns, casting shadows in the fine white springlight.

The cook in the west kitchen was named Hax. He stood huge in food-stained whites, a man with a crude-oil complexion and whose ancestry was a quarter black, a quarter yellow, a quarter from the South Islands, now almost forgotten (the world had moved on), and a quarter God knew what. He shuffled about three high-ceilinged steamy rooms like a tractor in low gear, wearing huge, Caliph-like slippers. He was one of those quite rare adults who communicate with small children fairly well and who love them all impartially — not in a sugary way but in a businesslike fashion that may sometimes entail a hug, in the same way that closing a big business deal may call for a handshake. He even loved the boys who had begun The Training, although they were different from other children — not always demonstrative and somehow dangerous, not in an adult way, but rather as if they were ordinary children with a slight touch of madness — and Cuthbert was not the first of Cort's students whom he had fed on the sly. At this moment

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he stood in front of his huge, rambling electric stove — one of six working appliances left on the whole estate. It was his personal domain, and he stood there watching the two boys bolt the gravied meat scraps he had produced. Behind, before, and all around, cookboys, scullions, and various underlings rushed through the foaming, humid air, rattling pans, stirring stew, slaving over potatoes and vegetables in nether regions. In the dimly lit pantry alcove, a washerwoman with a doughy, miserable face and hair caught up in a rag splashed water around on the floor with a gray and raveled mop.

One of the scullery boys rushed up with a man from the Guards in tow. "This man, he wantchoo, Hax."

"All right." Hax nodded to the Guard, and he nodded back. "You boys," he said. "Go over to Maggie, she'll give you some pie. Then scat."

They nodded and went over to Maggie, who gave them huge wedges of pie on dinner plates ... but gingerly, as if they were wild dogs that might bite her.

"Let's eat it on the stairs," Cuthbert said.

"All right."

They sat behind a huge, sweating stone colonnade, out of sight of the kitchen, and gobbled their pie with their fingers. It was only moments later that they saw shadows fall on the far curving wall of the wide staircase. Roland grabbed Cuthbert's arm. "Come on," he said. "Someone's coming." Cuthbert looked up, his face surprised and berry-stained.

But the shadows stopped, still out of sight. It was Hax and the man from the Guards. The boys sat where they were. If they moved now, they might be heard.

"...the good man," the Guard was saying.

"In Farson?"

"In two weeks," the Guard replied. "Maybe three. You have to come with us. There's a shipment from the freight depot...." A particularly loud crash of pots and pans and a volley of catcalls directed at the hapless potboy who had dropped them blotted out some of the rest; then the boys heard the Guard finish: "...poisoned meat."

"Risky."

"Ask not what the good man can do for you—" the Guard began.

"—but what you can do for him," Hax sighed. "Soldier, ask not."

"You know what it could mean," the Guard said quietly.

"Yes. And I know my responsibilities to him; you don't need to lecture me. I love him just as you do."

"All right. The meat will be marked for short-term storage in your cold-rooms. But you'll have to be quick. You must understand that."

"There are children in Farson?" The cook asked sadly. It was not really a question.

"Children everywhere," the Guard said gently. "It's the children we — and he — care about."

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"Poisoned meat. Such a strange way to care for children." Hax uttered a heavy, whistling sigh. "Will they curdle and hold their bellies and cry for their mammas? I suppose they will."

"It will be like a going to sleep," the Guard said, but his voice was too confidently reasonable.

"Of course," Hax said, and laughed.

"You said it yourself. 'Soldier, ask not.' Do you enjoy seeing children under the rule of the gun, when they could be under his hands, who makes the lion lie down with the lamb?"

Hax did not reply.

"I go on duty in twenty minutes," the Guard said, his voice once more calm. "Give me a joint of mutton and I will pinch one of your girls and make her giggle. When I leave—"

"My mutton will give no cramps to your belly, Robeson."

"Will you...." But the shadows moved away and the voices were lost.

I could have killed them, Roland thought, frozen and fascinated. I could have killed them both with my knife, slit their throats like hogs. He looked at his hands, now stained with gravy and berries as well as dirt from the day's lessons.

"Roland."

He looked at Cuthbert. They looked at each other for a long moment in the fragrant semidarkness, and a taste of warm despair rose in Roland's throat. What he felt might have been a sort of death — something as brutal and final as the death of the dove in the white sky over the games field. Hax? He thought, bewildered. Hax who put a poultice on my leg that time? *Hax?* And then his mind snapped closed, cutting the subject off.

What he saw, even in Cuthbert's humorous, intelligent face, was nothing — nothing at all. Cuthbert's eyes were flat with Hax's doom. In Cuthbert's eyes, it had already happened. He had fed them and they had gone to the stairs to eat and then Hax had brought the Guard named Robeson to the wrong corner of the kitchen for their treasonous little *tete-a-tete.* That was all. In Cuthbert's eyes Roland saw that Hax would die for his treason as a viper dies in a pit. That, and nothing else. Nothing at all.

They were gunslinger's eyes.

Roland's father was only just back from the uplands, and he looked out of place amid the drapes and the chiffon fripperies of the main receiving hall that the boy had only lately been granted access to, as a sign of his apprenticeship.

His father was dressed in black jeans and a blue work shirt. His cloak, dusty and streaked, torn to the lining in one place, was slung carelessly over his shoulder with no regard for the way it and he clashed with the elegance of the room. He was desperately thin and the heavy handlebar mustache below his nose seemed to weight his head

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as he looked down at his son. The guns crisscrossed over the wings of his hips hung at the perfect angle for his hands, the worn sandalwood handles looking dull and sleepy in this languid indoor light.

"The head cook," his father said softly. "Imagine it! The tracks that were blown upland at the railhead. The dead stock of Hendrickson. And perhaps even ... imagine! Imagine!"

He looked more closely at his son.

"It preys on you."

"Like the hawk," Roland said. "It preys on you." He laughed — at the startling appropriateness of the image rather than at any lightness in the situation.

His father smiled.

"Yes," Roland said. "I guess it ... it preys on me."

"Cuthbert was with you," his father said. "He will have told his father by now."

"Yes."

"He fed both of you when Cort—"

"Yes."

"And Cuthbert. Does it prey on him, do you think?"

"I don't know." Such an avenue of comparison did not really interest him. He was not concerned with how his feelings compared with those of others.

"It preys on you because you feel you've killed?"

Roland shrugged unwillingly, all at once not content with this probing of his motivations.

"Yet you told. Why?"

The boy's eyes widened. "How could I not? Treason was —"

His father waved a hand curtly. "If you did it for something as cheap as a schoolbook idea, you did it unworthily. I would rather see all of Farson poisoned."

"I didn't!" The words jerked out of him violently. "I wanted to kill him — both of them! Liars! Snakes! They—"

"Go ahead."

"They hurt me," he finished, defiant. "They did something to me. Changed something. I wanted to kill them for it."

His father nodded. "That is worthy. Not moral, but it is not your place to be moral. In fact..." He peered at his son. "Morals may always be beyond you. You are not quick, like Cuthbert or Hendrickson's boy. It will make you formidable."

The boy, impatient before this, felt both pleased and troubled. "He will—"

"Hang."

The boy nodded. "I want to see it."

Roland the elder threw his head back and roared laughter. "Not as formidable as I thought ... or perhaps just stupid." He closed his mouth abruptly. An arm shot out like a bolt of lightning and grabbed the boy's upper arm painfully. He grimaced but did not flinch. His father peered at him steadily, and the boy looked back, although it was more difficult than hooding the hawk had been.

"All right," he said, and turned abruptly to go.

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"Father?"

"What?"

"Do you know who they were talking about? Do you know who the good man is?"

His father turned back and looked at him speculatively. "Yes. I think I do."

"If you caught him," Roland said in his thoughtful, near-plodding way, "no one else like Cook would have to ... have to be neck-popped."

His father smiled thinly. "Perhaps not for a while. But in the end, someone always has to have his or her neck popped, as you so quaintly put it. The people demand it. Sooner or later, if there isn't a turncoat, the people make one."

"Yes," Roland said, grasping the concept instantly — it was one he never forgot. "But if you got him—"

"No," his father said flatly.

"Why?"

For a moment his father seemed on the verge of saying why, but he bit it back. "We've talked enough for now, I think. Go out from me."

He wanted to tell his father not to forget his promise when the time came for Hax to step through the trap, but he was sensitive to his father's moods. He suspected his father wanted to fuck. He closed that door quickly. He was aware that his mother and father did that ... that thing together, and he was reasonably well informed as to what that act was, but the mental picture that always condensed with the thought made him feel both uneasy and oddly guilty. Some years later, Susan would tell him the story of Oedipus, and he would absorb it in quiet thoughtfulness, thinking of the odd and bloody triangle formed by his father, his mother, and by Marten — known in some quarters as the good man. Or perhaps it was a quadrangle, if one wished to add himself.

"Good night, father," Roland said.

"Good night, son," his father said absently, and began unbuttoning his shirt. In his mind, the boy was already gone. Like father, like son.

* * *

Gallows Hill was on the Farson Road, which was nicely poetic — Cuthbert might have appreciated this, but Roland did not. He did appreciate the splendidly ominous scaffold which climbed into the brilliantly blue sky, a black and angular silhouette which overhung the coach road.

The two boys had been let out of Morning Exercises — Cort had read the notes from their fathers laboriously, lips moving, nodding here and there. When he finished with them both, he had looked up at the blue-violet dawn sky and had nodded again.

"Wait here," he said, and went toward the leaning stone hut that was his living quarters. He came back with a slice of rough, unleavened bread, broke it in two, and gave half to each.

"When it's over, each of you will

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put this beneath his shoes. Mind you do exactly as I say, or I'll clout you into next week."

They had not understood until they arrived, riding double on Cuthbert's gelding. They were the first, fully two hours ahead of anyone else and four hours before the hanging, and Gallows Hill stood deserted — except for the rooks and the ravens. The birds were everywhere, and of course they were all black. They roosted noisily on the hard, jutting bar that overhung the trap — the armature of death. They sat in a row along the edge of the platform, they jostled for position on the stairs.

"They leave him," Cuthbert muttered. "For the birds."

"Let's go up," Roland said.

Cuthbert looked at him with something like horror. "Do you think—"

Roland cut him off with a gesture of his hands. "We're *years* early. No one will come."

"All right."

They walked slowly toward the gibbet, and the birds took indignant wing, cawing and circling like a mob of angry dispossessed peasants. Their bodies were flat and black against the pure dawnlight of the sky.

For the first time Roland felt the enormity of his responsibility in the matter; this wood was not noble, not part of the awesome machine of Civilization, but merely warped pine covered with splattered white bird droppings. It was splashed everywhere — stairs, railing, platform — and it stank.

The boy turned to Cuthbert with startled, terrified eyes and saw Cuthbert looking back at him with the same expression.

Birdshit.

"I can't," Cuthbert whispered. "I can't watch it."

Roland shook his head slowly. There was a lesson here, he realized, not a shining thing but something that was old and rusty and misshapen. It was why their fathers had let them come. And with his usual stubborn and inarticulate doggedness, Roland laid mental hands on whatever it was.

"You can, Bert."

"I won't sleep tonight."

"Then you won't," Roland said, not seeing what that had to do with it.

Cuthbert suddenly seized Roland's hand and looked at him with such mute agony that Roland's own doubt came back, and he wished sickly that they had never gone to the west kitchen that night. His father had been right. Better every man, woman, and child in Farson than this.

But whatever the lesson was, rusty, half-buried thing, he would not let it go or give up his grip on it.

"Let's not go up," Cuthbert said. "We've seen everything."

And Roland nodded reluctantly, feeling his grip on that thing — whatever it was — weaken. Cort, he knew, would have knocked them both sprawling and then forced them up to

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the platform step by cursing step ... and sniffing fresh blood back up their noses as they went. Cort would probably have looped new hemp over the yardarm itself and put the noose around each of their necks in turn, would have made them stand on the trap to feel it; and Cort would have been ready to strike them again if either wept or lost control of his bladder. And Cort, of course, would have been right. For the first time in his life, Roland found himself hating his own childhood. He wished for the size and calluses and sureness of age.

He deliberately pried a splinter from the railing and placed it in his breast pocket before turning away.

"Why did you do that?" Cuthbert asked.

He wished to answer something swaggering: *Oh, the luck of the gallows...*but he only looked at Cuthbert and shook his head. "Just so I'll have it," he said. "Always have it."

They walked away from the gallows, sat down, and waited. In an hour or so the first of them began to gather, mostly families who had come in broken-down wagons and shays, carrying their breakfasts with them — hampers of cold pancakes folded over fillings of wild strawberry jam. Roland felt his stomach growl hungrily and wondered again, with despair, where the honor and the nobility of it was. It seemed to him that Hax in his dirty whites, walking around and around his steaming, subterranean kitchen, had more honor than this. He fingered the splinter from the gallows tree with sick bewilderment. Cuthbert lay beside him with his face made impassive.

In the end it was not so much, and Roland was glad. Hax was carried in an open cart, but only his huge girth gave him away; he had been blindfolded with a wide black cloth that hung down over his face. A few threw stones, but most merely continued with their breakfasts.

A gunslinger whom the boy did not know (he was glad his father had not drawn the lot) led the fat cook carefully up the steps. Two Guards of the Watch had gone ahead and stood on either side of the trap. When Hax and the gunslinger reached the top, the gunslinger threw the noosed rope over the crosstree and then put it over the cook's head, dropping the knot until it lay just below the left ear. The birds had all flown, but Roland knew they were waiting.

"Do you wish to make confession?" the gunslinger asked.

"I have nothing to confess," Hax said. His words carried well, and his voice was oddly dignified in spite of the muffle of cloth which hung over his lips. The cloth ruffled slightly in the faint, pleasant breeze that had blown up. "I have not forgotten my father's face; it has been with me through all."

Roland glanced sharply at the crowd and was disturbed by what he saw there — a sense of sympathy?

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Perhaps admiration? He would ask his father. When traitors are called heroes (or heroes traitors, he supposed in his frowning way), dark times must have fallen. He wished he understood better. His mind flashed to Cort and the bread Cort had given them. He felt contempt; the day was coming when Cort would serve him. Perhaps not Cuthbert; perhaps Cuthbert would buckle under Cort's steady fire and remain a page or a horseboy (or infinitely worse, a perfumed diplomat, dallying in receiving chambers or looking into bogus crystal balls with doddering kings and princes), but he would not. He knew it.

"Roland?"

"I'm here." He took Cuthbert's hand, and their fingers locked together like iron.

The trap dropped. Hax plummeted through. And in the sudden stillness, there was a sound: that sound an exploding pineknot makes on the hearth during a cold winter night.

But it was not so much. The cook's legs kicked out once in a wide Y; the crowd made a satisfied whistling noise; the Guards of the Watch dropped their military pose and began to gather things up negligently. The gunslinger walked back down the steps slowly, mounted his horse, and rode off, cutting roughly through one gaggle of picnickers, making them scurry.

The crowd dispersed rapidly after that, and in forty minutes the two boys were left alone on the small hill they had chosen. The birds were returning to examine their new prize. One lit on Hax's shoulder and sat there chummily, darting its beak at the bright and shiny hoop Hax had always worn in his right ear.

"It doesn't look like him at all," Cuthbert said.

"Oh, yes, it does," Roland said confidently as they walked toward the gallows, the bread in their hands. Cuthbert looked abashed.

They paused beneath the crosstree, looking up at the dangling, twisting body. Cuthbert reached up and touched one hairy ankle, defiantly. The body started on a new, twisting arc.

Then, rapidly, they broke the bread and spread the crumbs beneath the dangling feet. Roland looked back just once as they rode away. Now there were thousands of birds. The bread — he grasped this only dimly — was symbolic, then.

"It was good," Cuthbert said suddenly. "It ... I ... I liked it. I did."

Roland was not shocked by this, although he had not particularly cared for the scene. But he thought he could perhaps understand it.

"I don't know about that," he said, "but it was something. It surely was."

The land did not fall to the good man for another ten years, and by that time he was a gunslinger, his father was dead, he himself had become a matricide — and the world had moved on.

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III

"Look," Jake said, pointing upward.

The gunslinger looked up and felt an obscure joint in his back pop. They had been in the foothills two days now, and although the waterskins were almost empty again, it didn't matter now. There would soon be all the water they could drink.

He followed the vector of Jake's finger upward, past the rise of the green plain to the naked and flashing cliffs and gorges above it ... and on up toward the snowcap itself.

Faint and far, nothing but a tiny dot (it might have been one of those motes that dance perpetually in front of the eyes, except for its constancy), the gunslinger beheld the man in black, moving up the slopes with deadly progress, a minuscule fly on a huge granite wall.

"Is that him?" Jake asked.

The gunslinger looked at the depersonalized mote doing its faraway acrobatics, feeling nothing but a premonition of sorrow.

"That's him, Jake."

"Do you think we'll catch him?"

"Not on this side. On the other. And not if we stand here talking about it."

"They're so high," Jake said. "What's on the other side?"

"I don't know," the gunslinger said. "I don't think anybody does. Maybe they did once. Come on, boy."

They began to move upward again, sending small runnels of pebbles and sand down toward the desert that washed away behind them in a flat bake-sheet that seemed to never end. Above them, far above, the man in black moved up and up and up. It was impossible to see if he looked back. He seemed to leap across impossible gulfs, to scale sheer faces. Once or twice he disappeared, but always they saw him again, until the violet curtain of dusk shut him out of their view. When they made their camp for the evening, the boy spoke little, and the gunslinger wondered if the boy knew what he had already intuited. He thought of Cuthbert's face, hot, dismayed, excited. He thought of the crumbs. He thought of the birds. It ends this way, he thought. Again and again it ends this way. There are quests and roads that lead ever onward, and all of them end in the same place — upon the killing ground.

Except, perhaps, the road to the Tower.

The boy, the sacrifice, his face innocent and very young in the light of their tiny fire, had fallen asleep over his beans. The gunslinger covered him with the horse blanket and then curled up to sleep himself.

This ends the second section of The Dark Tower — the story of Roland, the last gunslinger, and his search for the Tower that stands at the root of time.

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Carodac Cador tells us that he is of Irish, Welsh, Cherokee and Peruvian extraction. He lives now in San Francisco. This is his second published story; his first, "Payment In Kind," has been anthologized four times to date and was included in YEAR'S BEST FANTASY.

The Shadowed Waters

BY

C. A. CADOR

Many are the moods of the sea, as sudden and changeable as those who sail upon her breast, but the wise know that beneath the surface there are two pulses that change not: the green meadows of the Land-Under-Wave and the endless cold in the hearts and halls of the solitary kelpies. For the sea is a great queen, and holds life and death outstretched in her hands.

It had been a perfect day when they set out for Carran: the sun warm on Ailil's back, the sky clear and impossibly blue, the sea smooth as glass beneath his little boat, with just enough wind to fill her sails. It was High Summer in the Isles, striving to balance its brevity with beauty.

Ailil had sung as the boat sped on its way, and his face seemed to mirror the sun's light. He was young and fair, the brother of a chief, and he sailed to claim his chosen bride — Fiona, the daughter of Carrran's chief.

Now it was night; the wind was cold, and Ailil sat in the boat's bow, his face dark with anger and pain. He stared out across the moonlit sea while the words of Carran's chief burned in his mind.

"I mean no slur on you or your house," Donal had said, "but understand: I have but the one daughter. It has always been my thought she would marry a chief. That you are not ... only a younger son."

There had been more, but he had not listened. Perhaps it would have been easier if there had been some coldness in his reception on Carran; but even the song Donal's bard had sung after the welcome feast had been a pretty compliment: the old ballad of the founding of his house, that told how a woman of the silkies, the seal folk, had seen Eochy the son of Conn

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in his boat and come out of the sea for love of him in his beauty. She had stayed with him nine years and borne him three children before she went again home to the Land-Under-Wave, blessing the folk of Iniscoll for all time with the sea-luck of fair winds and full nets. From her was sprung the heroes of Iniscoll, for when Eochy died his sister's sons had stepped aside so that his children might hold the high seat.

Now, Carran's welcomes ashes in his mouth, Ailil looked out over the grey sea, remembering Fiona, the taste of her, her hair long and gleaming in the moonlight.

They had met beside the Beltane fires. He had seen her, slim and proud as a well-made sword, lovely as a harp. He had been startled when she returned his smile and watched almost incredulously as she walked toward him. Together they had danced, and hand-in-hand leapt across the fire. Later she had led him up into the heather-clad hills to welcome-in the summer.

All that was behind him now, and there was an end of singing.

He spat into the sea and said, "Only a younger son."

"It's nothing but the truth," came Rory's voice from the stern. "There's no dearth of chiefs among the Hundred Isles, and a gold fillet outweighs golden hair and a fine pair of legs in a great lord's eyes."

"Oh, I know, and there'll be other women, and I'm only seventeen. And only a younger son. Donal said it all, very well." Ailil laughed bitterly.

Three seals broke water near the boat, swimming before the bow as if they were leading it.

When Ailil saw that the one in the middle was pure white, a strange mad thought took shape in his mind, for in the Isles a white seal-skin was a sacred thing, beyond price. *Surely if I brought that skin to Donal as a gift, he would not send me away again.*

He drew a light harpoon from its leather scabbard, and raised it for the throw. Rory's hand clenched about his wrist, and his voice hissed in Ailil's ear. "What would you do? Have you forgotten the Law of Eochy?"

He turned to Rory, lowering the spear, and said, "No, no, I was just trying it for balance." But when Rory returned to his place at the rudder, he raised it again, sighting down the shaft.

Again Rory caught his arm. This time his voice quivered with anger. "You fool, would you ruin us all for your courting?"

Ailil let the spear fall, saying, "You have the right of it."

When he turned back to the sea, though, and saw the three seals still in their place a few yards ahead of the boat, the madness came on him again. He snatched up the harpoon and threw it with a single motion, knowing as it left his hand it would strike home.

It did, and the white seal screamed. The other seals strove to bear him up,

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but could not; and as he sank beneath the surface, his form changed to that of a naked, dark-haired man who clutched feebly at the haft of the spear buried in his side.

Rory moaned as though the wound were his own. He struck Ailil a blow that knocked him to the deck, then cut the harpoon loose.

Ailil rose up slowly, full of the horror of his deed. "What I have done, I have done," he said, looking out over the sea. "But I call the people of the sea to witness that it is my deed only, that their anger may fall on me alone." He turned to Rory. "We are bound by oath to stand together. Will you keep that oath?"

"Aye." The answer was hardly more than a grunt.

"Then swear no word of this will pass your lips."

"I swear," Rory said, as if he were strangling on the words. "I swear by the teats of the earth and the sea's womb none shall know of this day's work from me." He turned his back on Ailil then, and continued, "And I swear by the same oath, and call the four winds as witness, that the ties between myself and Ailil the son of Red Cathal are broken, the oaths between us unsaid, and that though we stand side by side in the chief's hall it shall be to me as if the wide sea rolled between us."

Rory whirled around to face Ailil again. "How like you my swearing?"

Ailil hung his head and said nothing: nor was the silence broken until they had made fast the boat at Iniscoll. Ailil leapt to the shore and said, "I will sleep in the heather; I have no stomach for the Great House this night. Tell my brother how we fared at Carran."

Before Rory could reply he was gone, running for the hills.

That night a storm came roaring out of the north, and the fury of sea and wind was hurled against the island, so that houses lost their roofs and boats lay smashed on the beach.

Great was the anger in the Land-Under-Wave. Three hundred years and more had passed since Aoife had left the bed of Eochy Mac Conn and returned to the sea, but its passing had seemed as but a day. They for whom life and memory are so long are hard put to reckon with the forgetfulness of men, and the thought of the long years of music and song and laughter Ailil had driven into darkness was bitterness beyond bitterness — for among the seal-folk too is a bard held sacred.

In his great halls strung with sea wrack, the kelpie of Iniscoll Rock mourned for his slain friend. Never again would he hear those songs so fair they could ease his loneliness and warm the cold that lies so deep in a kelpie's heart. Presently he arose in anger, wrapping himself in the cloak of the Sea-Death.

Greatest of all was the grief of Aoife, who had been wife to Eochy of

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Iniscoll, for it was her father Ailil had slain.

Ailil huddled against a cliff for shelter from the wind-driven rain, shuddering at the sound of the sea's anger.

In his hand he held his dagger, thoughtfully, with a kind of exaltation imagining its keen edge sliding through his flesh, some shepherd finding his corpse, the grief at the High House when he was carried in and laid before the open hearth.

His need for Fiona burned fiercer within him in its hopelessness than ever it had before, and the silkie's murder was like a leaden shroud enfolding him.

He summoned up a picture of Fiona's tear-streaked face blazing fury at her father as the old man tried guiltily to comfort her.

Yet in the end he did not die that night. He feared to leave the sea folk still hungry for vengeance, and none but the innocent to wreak it on.

At dawn he walked down out of the hills to the High House. The storm had worn itself out and the sky was clear, but so great and sudden had been its onset that several boats had been wrecked; the beach was littered with broken wood.

The High House itself was humming with activity when he arrived; he found it easy to go unnoticed among all the busyness of undoing the storm's damage: nets being mended, roofs rethatched, wood being bent into shape, and hides trimmed for the making of new coracles.

He muttered a brief word of thanks that his brother had given him a cottage of his own, so that he was not among those who slept in the Great Hall itself; facing that jesting, jostling pack of young men was for the moment beyond him.

He went directly to his cottage. With all Rory's things gone, it looked somehow desolate, but he had expected that.

He was awakened by the angry murmur of distant thunder and a sound like someone knocking on his door. He was on his feet before he realized that it was only the wooden shutter of the cottage's one window banging open and shut in the wind.

Another storm, he thought as he closed and barred it.

He briefly considered sleeping again, but the empty ache in the pit of his stomach suggested it was time to brave the Great Hall in search of food.

The hall was built on the old, old pattern: a round one-story structure forty feet across, stone-walled and turf-roofed, with a hearth fire burning from Samhain to Samhain at its center. It was the heart of Iniscoll: there the island's heroes were feted, and its lords held court; there at winter's beginning the chief kindled the one flame that would burn the year through in every house on the island; and there, beneath the dirt floor, its chiefs were buried.

Ailil's brother Alasdair was within,

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sitting by the hearth, with a few of the clan elders. Close by was their sister Grania, and her son, the boy Art, who would be chief after Alasdair.

Alasdair rose when he saw Ailil and motioned him off to an empty part of the chamber.

"Rory told me what happened yesterday."

Ailil's stomach tightened in a knot. "You mean about Fiona."

Alasdair nodded. "And about what happened in the boat."

Ailil turned away and stammered, in a low voice, "Wh-what did he say?"

"That you were so taken up with yourself that you quarreled with him on your way home and spoke words which cannot be forgiven."

"Oh." It was hard to keep it from becoming a sigh of relief.

"Is that all? Just oh? Granted you were disappointed, but you knew the family of a chief cannot enter formal marriage without his consent. But a chief depends on the loyalty of his friends, of the clan. You do not anger them without cause."

"I'm sorry."

"That changes nothing. You have lost a friend, at least; perhaps gained an enemy. Small matter, save that you are my brother. If I die, you will be regent for the boy." He jerked his chin at Grania and Art. "You should be ashamed. I am."

Ailil said nothing as his brother spun on his heel and stalked away.

* * *

The storm exceeded in fury that of the night before and raged on into the next day. Nor did all the island's boats return safe to harbor: thirty men and boys were lost.

Those who returned carried another grief. The herring and cod were gone overnight from the waters.

Though the next night was calm and clear, there were few on the island who slept well. The sounds of women keening their dead were everywhere, and wakes were so many that folk moved from one to another in torchlit processions.

For Ailil it was a long night indeed. At sunset, his mother Fand, the Royal Woman of the Island, set out from the High House. With her went Grania, who would be Royal Woman after her, to act as acolyte, and her other children as torchbearers, all wearing black.

Fand led them, dressed in the white robes of death and rebirth, a branch of hawthorn in her hand. About her head she wore a wreath of evergreen holly, and from it her hair flowed in red-gold billows.

Slowly the little procession wound its way to the house of Fergus Mac Ivor, who had died with a son and a nephew in the storm.

They stopped before the house and began to sing the Death Croon. In a moment the door opened, and the eldest man and woman of the house emerged, welcoming Fand according to custom.

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From the man she accepted a pinch of salt, and from the woman a sip of water, then, before entering, paused at the threshold and said, "Peace be on this house and peace in those herein."

From within the house a dozen voices answered, "Peace be on you, Lady of Iniscoll, and on those with you."

Ailil shuddered at the words. *If only they knew....*

Once inside they listened to the keens sung by the women and tasted the food and drink laid on the rough wooden table. Ailil sat in a corner avoiding the people of the house, all the while thinking, *All this I have caused.*

Then Fand and Grania performed the Opening of the Gates of the West, that the souls of the dead might pass oversea to the apple-land, the Land of the Young, and there for a time find rest.

To each mourning croft on the island they went; at each the same scene was enacted, and in each Ailil thought, *This too is my doing.*

When at last it was finished, they returned to the High House. Ailil lay long upon his cot before sleep came to him, and when it did, he dreamed not of Fiona, but of an endless stream of old women, faces wrinkled and tear-stained, of young women weeping for husbands and lovers, of children crying themselves to sleep in a corner, of sea-bloated faces staring at him, mouthing his name and pointing at him with kelp-draped hands.

The next day, a coracle that had set out to sea to search for the herring shoals was pulled under by a whirlpool that appeared from nowhere within sight of the island.

Ailil stood alone in the moonlight, his ears full of the sound of the sea, the wind hurling its spray into his face. Slowly he bent down and plucked from the water something shining gold: his most precious possession, the intricately carved brooch he had a few moments before tossed into the sea as a gift of atonement.

He had expected nothing else. *They do not take wergild; they do not carry their dead in their pockets. And what need have they of gold, who have all the treasures ever sunk in the sea....*

He threw his arms out beside him and called to the sea, "So be it then. A life for a life, a death for a death."

Then he threw himself into the dark swirling waters, but the waves bore him up and cast him on the beach, a rejected offering.

He lay sobbing where the sea left him, while the waters washed about him.

In his great hall under the sea, the kelpie of Iniscoll smiled as he watched the slow swaying dance of the weed-wrapped dead.

The next morning, Ailil was met halfway home by a boy of twelve, one

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of his brother's fosterlings.

"Ailil," the boy panted, "you're wanted ... at the High House ... the lady Fand is going to lead a purification of the island ... to cleanse it of the curse...."

Ailil began to run himself then; it was his duty to assist in such functions. It was a moment before the absurdity of it occurred to him.

Absurd or not, when they set out, Ailil was in his place.

Fand, carrying a staff of rowan and Alasdair the sword of Eochy, were in the lead. Grania and Ailil followed, bearing torches; after them came the islanders, almost all of them.

They made a complete circuit of Iniscoll, purifying it with fire and steel and the wand of fairy wood. They sang as they walked; first the threefold blessing, then the song against the evil eye, then a hymn to Manaan of the Sea, then a hymn to Brigid the Everpure, over and over.

When it was done, Fand was pale and drawn, as if she had fought a mighty battle. She wiped the sweat from her brow with her shawl and looked at her children. "I think it did not work; I am not sure, but I fear the power here is too great for us. Who are we to stand against the sea?"

She looked down at the wand in her hand. "I will call the Moon-Weavers tomorrow night to the standing stones. At least we may find the source of the curse."

* * *

That night, as Ailil slept, it seemed he was floating high above the white-capped sea, and he felt its anger rolling beneath him.

A cold, remote voice called his name. "Ailil, you are mine. You are mine."

It was as if he saw the kelpie's clawed and bony hand reaching up for him, out of the restless waters.

He fled then across the sky, the voice following as he went. In fleeing he awoke, but even there in his own bed he could almost hear the kelpie's voice.

He donned his finest clothes and braided his hair, fastening the braid ends with little golden pins. About his brow he set the fillet and last of all belted on his sword.

They shall see I dō not fear death; that much pride I still may keep.

Ailil found his brother outside the Great Hall, staring out over the sea. Alasdair turned at the sound of Ailil's footsteps, but when he saw who it was, waved him away.

Ailil ignored the gesture, and the annoyance plain on the chief's face. "Brother, I must speak with you; it's important."

"Wh —?" Alasdair cut the word off as he noticed Ailil's unaccustomed splendor. "Sailing again to Carran?" He paused. "Well, what is it?"

"It's all my fault, all of it."

The sarcastic older brother vanished in an instant, leaving only Alasdair the chief, who may have no care nor

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family save his folk. "What do you mean?"

"I killed a silkie," Ailil said, in a voice that sounded nearer seventy than seventeen. "It is my guilt and my deed; I ask for judgment."

Alasdair stared at him in horror. "Why?"

"I ... I thought to win Donal's consent with a white seal-skin ... I meant no harm. I loved her ... I offered myself to the sea as a peace gift, and it refused me." Ailil drew himself up and met his brother's stare. "What more is there to say? I ask for judgment."

Alasdair stood silent for a moment, as if searching for words that could bridge the gap between them. At last he shrugged. "I will summon the people to the shore beneath the Great House in two hours time. There what must be done, will be."

A crowd was already gathering on the stony shore. Ailil stood at its fringes, feeling awkward in his finery.

At last Alasdair mounted a rock and told them how and why the anger of the sea-shepherds had been roused against them.

As he spoke, the crowd cleared a space around Ailil, leaving him standing alone with the weight of their anger.

Alasdair turned to him then, and said, "Perhaps you should die, but not by my hand or word; what land can shelter one who kills his own kin? You have brought great grief upon us, but the debt you owe is less to us than to the sea. Our pact is broken and must be redeemed.

"This is my judgment. The one you slew was guiltless; one does not give bad cloth for good. Therefore I pass no sentence upon you."

Alasdair turned his back on them all and walked into the sea, singing a seal-calling song as he went. After a little time had passed, all could see seals breaking water far out from shore.

Alasdair raised his hand in greeting. "One of you has died, who did no harm to us. I give you my life for his, if it will buy back peace."

Faint the answer came. "So be it. But we make no peace with your brother."

Alasdair nodded acceptance and walked deeper into the sea, until the water covered him.

There was a moment when he was hidden, and then the sea lost its greyness and turned a translucent blue, and the air was full of the sound of harping and voices raised in a song of welcome.

Alasdair stood beneath the sea; about him the seal-folk danced in a ring upon a fair grassy plain all flower-strewn and fountained, more beautiful than any mortal land.

For a moment all stood in silence, knowing they were seeing the Land-Under-Wave where the silkies shed their sea-skins and walk like men; then it was gone, and there was only the grey sea.

All on the shore knew that their

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chief had not died, but been changed, buying peace not with his death but his willingness to die.

Fand stood at the front of all the throng, the water swirling about her ankles in the long wondering silence. Finally she turned to the folk; tears glinted on her cheeks as she said, "I here take up the regency of Iniscoll for my grandson Art, who is not yet of age. Tomorrow I shall chose a war-leader. I pronounce my son's judgment on his brother just; let none harm Ailil on pain of death. But also let it be heard, I put the ban on him, that none may give him fire or food, drink or shelter on this island. Now go to your homes."

They went, with bowed heads and lowered voices, until Ailil and Fand were alone on the beach.

Ailil walked toward his mother, but she stopped him with a gesture of her hand. "There is no evil in you, my son; yet you have done a terrible thing and must gather in its fruits. I forgive you, but forgiveness does not mend a broken pot. I will mourn you among the dead."

She turned on her heel and walked away, and Ailil was left alone.

He took his sword in his hand and struck at a stone until it broke, tears running down his face the while.

He bent and kissed the ground, knowing he would never set foot on Iniscoll again. Then he launched his boat and turned it toward the sunset.

As he steered out to sea, a mist gathered about the boat, and the voice of the kelpie rang cold on his ear.

Never did that boat touch land again, nor leave that mist. For generations fishermen caught in the sea mist have sworn they saw it in the greyness or heard Ailil's voice calling to them for news of those long dead. None knows to what end he may come, or when, save only the kelpie of Iniscoll.

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Outside

BY

DAVID F. BISCHOFF

On Thursday, just when it *seemed* like he was going to make it okay, just when things were going well and the sun shone gold, and the grass glimmered cool rippling green and everything appeared to fit together like pieces of a seamless jigsaw puzzle, the horrors truly began.

As usual, Martin Haggins woke late that morning, deliciously snarled in his cream sheet ocean. This was the exquisite moment he decided that, yes — things were going to be fine. The sun gently jammed a pillar of shine through the parted beige gingham curtains of the bedroom. The warmth tingled his feet like friendly, silent hearth embers.

Haggins yawned, stretched, scratched, and wiped the sleepy tears dangling in his eyes. ("Oh, dear!" Daphne had said lovingly upon waking with him in their early love. "You have sleepy tears!" Delicately, she would pluck the copper flakes from his eyelashes, and he would lie beneath her light curvaceous beauty, helpless with emotion.)

Hopping from his bachelor bed, he padded across the Persian carpet to the toilet, feeling loose and cool in his blue silk pajamas.

Snapping bacon. Sizzling eggs. Pop of toaster. Warm bread and butter smell seeping through the strong, homey, greasy aroma: breakfast, downed with hot milky tea in the colonial-style dining room overlooking the spacious front yard and the sweeping, majestic landscape below the hill he lived upon. Yes — how beautiful. A perfect selection. The trees were touched with enthusiastic spring. Gaily colored wildflowers poked through the verdant grass blankets covering the

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few sweeping slopes that had no trees. Dandelions mostly. But there were white, blue-edged lilies and frosty-white honeysuckle and wild roses and a scatter of other sorts as well; Martin Haggins had no aversion to flowers that needed no tending, just grew and existed, lovely. No, none at all. In the valley, there was a squat little antique town, crisscrossed with streets — but it was such a small town it actually added to the view rather than subtracting. A bit of stiff, man-made geometry against which nature's lines seemed that much more glorious. That, and it was necessary. He took a weekly trip down to that diminutive hamlet, picked up supplies at Fred's Supermarket, and that would be it: his only contact with the townspeople, or any other human beings. Which was the way he wanted it. Now that he had full control over what he did and what surrounded him, he had painstakingly mapped out exactly where he wanted to live; and this was it, almost precisely. Perhaps even superior to his original vision.

He had finally settled on what he wanted, now that it was all over.

But, no, he reminded himself, mildly upset by the bitter taste of the tea leaves in his last slurp from the white porcelain mug. It's not over, Haggins. It's just *beginning*, really. You're the boss now. *You* call the shots. You've got to design your *own* happiness. Nobody is responsible for that but *you!*

Cheered by this little inner pep talk, he carried the dirty dishes into the kitchen and cleaned them in the sink with dish lotion scented with lemon. He racked the china and sparkling glasses, letting them set to dry, rubbed his hands over the smooth top of his pajamas, and went back to his bedroom to change.

A little nip about the old estate, he decided. Yes, that would be absolutely ripping.

Chuckling, he slipped into worn, comfortable blue jeans, frayed at the bottom rear of the flared legs from being too long and dragging on the ground. He donned a red and blue checked flannel shirt, a windbreaker, and a dirty pair of Keds, then went for the walk that would precede the day's work.

Jogging a ways, punching the air, he was soon far from the house, just short of an apple tree copse. The atmosphere was ripe-apple crisp, just the way he liked it. He hoisted himself onto a low branch of the closest tree and regarded his distant home.

An old house. Brick. Wood. Gabled. Three stories, twenty rooms from basement to attic. The sort of semi-Victorian place he had always admired. Now he had one to himself. After all this time.

Attached was a more modern garage. Flanking this to the left stood a barn, where he kept his two horses. He used it for little else. Completing this American Gothic picture, to the house's right was a well with a quaint shingled roof. A black wooden bucket

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perched on the lip of it's red-brick mouth. The water the well held was the sweetest Martin had ever tasted.

A breeze fragrant with the grass, the wildflowers, and the apple blossoms that studded these tree branches sifted the bright green leaves about him. Martin felt suddenly very young.

In his youth, a neighbor in the suburbs had a group of very climbable trees, and now the memory sprang alive in his mind. Amidst the airy whispers of these waving leaves: were those the delighted cries of children? Martin smiled to himself, realizing that the sounds were merely memory's echoes. When life was so full of sensual stimuli, sometimes they got mixed: memory turned to life again; life to memory.

After a time of pleasant contemplation, Martin eased again to the soft, springy sod and hiked back to his house. He ambled around the buildings, noting that he should take down the storm windows and put up some screens soon. Yes, he always enjoyed that. He had been an apartment dweller the majority of his adult life. The odd jobs attendant to a house gave pleasure. An enjoyable way to pass the time, and time was nothing if not plentiful here. Plentiful as the sky, which seemed the inside of some robin's egg now, clean, clear. Some clouds up there would be nice, Martin thought. Big, fat, juicy cumulus sailing through the azure, with enough puffiness for the mind to play with, carving vapor sculptures.

On the horizon: a hint of white. No, a whole *wave* of white? Cumulus clouds. Wonderful. He would get his wish, soon.

Circuit of house and barn complete, he walked by the well. And stopped. And jounced up to it, resting a hand on the hard oak supports of the roof. This well.... This well was something special. Somehow it was the last touch to complete the totality of this place — making it perfect. *Right*. This fount of water, *clean* water, without the chlorine or other chemicals of city water.... He sat on the pine planks edging the top of the brick wall, leaned into the subterranean cool from the well and then peered down to see his reflection in its still water.

Blackness. Nothingness.

Except:

Vague breaths of mist in blackness.

And:

Moans. Moans seemingly from the center of the Earth, from buried, groaning souls.

All this — but no water.

He clamped his eyes shut, clapped his hands against his ears, and fell back, landing in the hard gray gravel that circled the well. *No!* he thought. Must ... *control! Control!* He had *not* seen the nothingness. He had *not* heard those despairing moans. Imagination; that was all. Must *face* it, show myself what's really there. The small rocks biting into his palms, he lifted himself and forced his head over the top of the well once more.

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Water. Cool, clear water, about ten feet down. Still. Deep. Cool. That was all: water.

Wheels on gravel. Crunching. An engine ... a car engine — quickly he twisted from the well. A green Dodge station wagon pulled into the driveway, leaving behind a trail of gray dust and exhaust. The vehicle stopped and a woman stepped out, dusky blonde hair wrapped in a pink scarf.

A small, delicate woman. Thirty-five, perhaps nudging forty at most.

"Hello, Martin," she said. The door closed with its familiar tinny clump.

"Go away," he said. "I don't want to deal with you. Not now, not ever."

She licked her thin lips and thoughtfully scanned the house, the barn and the garage. "So this is it, huh? Your resort. Your choice, your *sanctum sanctorum*. How's it all treating you?"

"I'm doing well enough, Daphne." Why was he even *talking* to her? Talking would make her linger. But somehow, he *had* to. "What are you doing here? I've provided well for you ... and the kids. Everything was all taken care of. Why are you here to...."

"Haunt you?" Daphne shook her head, cool blue eyes moist between those familiar high cheeks. "I just want ... want to *talk* to you, Martin. You can't get rid of me just like *that* —" Snap of fingers. "— you know. If you had a phone I would have called you."

"Why do you think I don't have a phone?"

Go away. Go away!

But she wasn't going away. She stood there by her ugly mud-splattered car, tears in her eyes, and she was talking. No way of stopping her, no way of getting her *out* of here....

"I've talked to all your friends, Martin. You've left them too, you know, and they're willing to talk to me now. They've been telling me about how you felt *trapped* all those years by me, by the kids. I did my best, Martin, I swear I did my best; and if you had only talked to me more, instead of those Happy Hour buddies, maybe the strain would not have been so much ... maybe all of this would not have happened. I just have to tell you that ... I take part of the blame, and God knows I've tried and lain awake at nights, hating myself for it. But it's not my fault, damnit. I've come all this way to tell you that. I've found another man, Martin. I have, and he *talks* to me, Martin. He doesn't compensate his frustrations with drink and work and hate."

"Well, that's just fine," Martin said, controlling himself. "I'm really and truly delighted to hear all that, and I'm glad you've come to tell it to me. All this was not exactly in my plans, but its good enough, and I'm actually starting to be happy. So why don't you just split now. I don't know why I'm talking to you, anyway."

"Happy? *Alone?*"

"There are things to do. I really am, Daphne. I really *am* happy."

"You sound like you're trying to

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convince yourself of that."

"Just go. There's no turning back for me now."

"No," she said, pityingly. She walked to him with an outstretched hand. "I suppose you've always lived this way, haven't you, Marty? By yourself, even when people were around. But I tried ... I really did."

"Just get out. I don't want to hear," he screamed. "Out! Out!"

He clenched his eyes shut for a long time, and when he finally opened them, the car was dusting down the road, away.

Where Daphne had stood there was now a cardboard box, sealed with masking tape. He was tempted to throw it away. Instead, he found his fingers tugging off the brown, sticky tape. In the box were things he had left behind. Pictures. Of James and Elsa and Willie. (Oh God, he *did* miss Willie.) Photos of himself with his abandoned family. Also in the box were odds and ends that he had attached sentiment to over the years. Books, his hairbrush, this and that. At the very bottom there was a long, sealed, gilt-edged envelope. No address on the outside. Ripping open one end, he pulled out a card with silver embossed printing.

Calmly he put the card back in its envelope and placed everything back in the box they had come in. He told himself: Don't get upset. Control. Remember. Control is everything.

Hefting up the box, he carried it into the backyard, where he dumped it in the ash-bottomed open oil barrel there. From the garage he got his can of lighter fluid and squirted a liberal amount of the stuff on the cardboard, drenching it. He tapped a cigarette from his hardpack of Marlboros, lit it with a paper match and threw the match into the barrel. The flame flowed quickly over the box, engulfing, burning, little hands of flame snatching at the air and charring the cardboard a crisp black.

Good.

He stood smoking awhile, watching the box and its contents burn. Then he flicked his half-smoked cigarette into the glowing embers and walked back to the house.

His typewriter was an IBM Selectric Two, the sort with the self-correcting tape feature. It was a dull blue. He could have ordered the computer-memory kind. But this suited his purposes well enough.

After setting his chrome pot of aromatic coffee upon the desk beside the typewriter, he sat in his revolving chair and glanced over the pages neatly stacked on the desk from the previous day, changing things here and there, nodding and smiling to himself. Finished, he poured a cup of coffee, steaming black, sipped at it, then rolled a fresh sheet of paper into the black platen, and wrote.

The words came smoothly and eas-

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ily. Like pissing; relieving pressure. Halfway into a novel now, he felt complete control. The reins were well-grasped in his hands now — totally under his sway were the words and the images he employed. This daily discipline was the cornerstone of his new existence.

Control.

In a flat-white bookcase nearby were copies of his published work. Short stories, novels, an occasional article in *Playboy*, *Esquire* or *Atlantic*. He had always known he could write, and yet for some reason the break from his former life was the thing that really got him into the swing ... started getting him published. Sometimes he would just sit at his desk and page through the magazines and his novels, admiring how beautiful his words looked in printed form. A sense of deep pride glowed within him at these times. Lined beside him on that bulky bookshelf of his works were the tangible records of his control. Pieces of himself. Nothing made him happier than seeing them accumulate. A *whole* bookshelf, someday, he told himself. Thousands of stories. Hundreds of books. *Good* stories, *good* books.

Why hadn't he started this sooner? he constantly asked himself, already knowing the answer. He *had* intended to. Out of the pre-seminary courses his father had bullied him into, he had meant to take a year off and start writing, full time. But Daphne had gotten pregnant, and somehow he could do nothing else but marry her — and quite suddenly, he was a rising executive in a canning company with a briefcase full of paperwork most nights that shoved away any time he might have used for writing. Daphne demanded his time, the kids demanded his time, the minutiae of life demanded his time. Frustration piled up year after year. Trapped. My God, trapped! It had been an emotional claustrophobia.

Haggins finished his daily ten pages and his pot of coffee late in the afternoon. With a tingle of pleasure, he flicked his machine off. He stacked the pages neatly together, swiveled to place them atop the rest of the manuscript....

On the pile was an envelope. Sticking from the envelope was a card. Embossed, raised printing. *The* card.

He could not stop a gasp. He grabbed the envelope and the card and hastily ripped them into little pieces. He flushed them down the toilet.

Calm, he told himself. Stay calm. It's all in your head.

At his liquor cabinet, he dumped two fingers of Dewars into a tumbler. This he sipped, sitting in a tan overstuffed chair in his tiered living room. Dusk was approaching. Fine. As the whiskey slipped through him, pulling its gauze of comfort and relaxation through his body, he put the envelope and its card behind him, immersing his mind in the sunset framed perfectly by the picture window: a slow reverse eruption of a spectrum's worth of

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color, sucked down by the horizon.

Finishing the astringent but smooth liquor, he donned his windbreaker again for his evening walk to the mailbox at the end of the driveway. Outside, the stars speckled the sky, except for those blocked by his much-wished-for cumulus clouds ghosting layers beneath. The moon lay in the horizon, caught on the tree branches like some murky, pock-marked crystal ball, opaqued to the future. The spring cold had stepped up. He wished he had worn something below the windbreaker, for the cold seemed to seep into his soul.

The cold....

Control, he thought. Control.

Slowly, he felt warmer. Warm with the alcohol in his bloodstream and the thoughts in his head. The card meant nothing. Some stupid trick his subconscious played on him. Yes.

Night was thick and heavy when he opened the large aluminum mailbox labeled M. HAGGINS. Reaching in, he found two small envelopes and a large one; that would be the new *Playboy* with his latest published short story. A thrill of anticipation coursed within him, as it always did when he first saw his name printed under a story title in a magazine. What a waste all those years with Daphne had been — what a leech she was, emotionally and psychologically, not to mention financially. Now that he was free of her, everything was fine, *would be* fine.

As he walked back up the rutted driveway, the snickers began. He had heard them before from the portion of the wood that bordered his little hill, spreading green and leafy down into the deep valley. Heard them many times. The best thing was just to ignore them, not even glance into that forest. Tonight, though, they were very loud.

Control. Control.

A thrashing. Something in those trees. The snickers had changed to laughter — a single voice of laughter, from just above the tree branches. Martin Haggins did not look, but kept on, averting his head. Soon, as he knew it would, the laughter died.

Tightly, he clasped his mail in both hands as he jogged back to the house. Somehow, sometimes the nights here spooked him. He preferred to stay in his house on nights like these. He skirted the well, uneasy about it after the day's incident. About to enter the house, he remembered he had not attended to the horses: fed them, or anything. Stupid, leaving them cooped up there all day. Well, he would make that up to them tomorrow.

When he opened the barn doors, however, the horses were gone, with no sign of how they could have escaped. He ran back to the house.

Blocking entrance to that door was one of his horses. Its hooves had changed to steel, coruscating as though from reflected lasers. Through flared nostrils it snorted long plumes of sulfurous flame.

Clenched in its bared teeth was the card.

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"Oh God," Martin said. The horse clicked its hooves on the cement of the walkway. Sparks hissed up. Martin stared hard at the creature, refusing to be frightened. Will power. He needed to use will power more effectively.

With an anxious whinny, a rustle of its long black mane and roll of wild, wide eyes, it tossed its head, flicking the card up, then letting it flutter to the ground. It reared, pawed in the air with its dazzling hooves, then galloped away into the night, leaving the smell of burnt air in its violent wake.

Martin stooped and picked the card off the trampled grass. Hastily, he trotted the rest of the walkway to the front door. He locked and latched it behind him and then destroyed the card, burning it in an ashtray.

Three cards today. Before, he had gotten perhaps three a week, at most. Sitting in his soft old couch full of musky comfort, lamp forming a cone of light over him, he sipped at more whiskey and read his mail to settle down.

The large Manila envelope was indeed the May *Playboy*. His story was ten pages past the centerfold, lying atop a pictoral concerning "The Girls of the Orient." "The Awful Truth." Not long. Two thousand words. There was the usual fine illustration accompanying it. He smiled with satisfaction and proceeded to open the other pieces of mail.

One envelope held a royalty check from his agent for $4,753.00. From the paperback edition of his first novel, *Laughter and Tears*.

The other was from his publisher. A fan letter, passed on. He scanned it twice and felt very good for it. How nice. The reader simply *had* to write to tell him that he was her *favorite* writer!

He prepared a spaghetti dinner that he ate leisurely with Chianti and garlic bread. He flipped through the new *Playboy*. Most of the pages were blank. White.

Defective copy? Must be. He finished dinner, leaving the dishes in the sink for later. He went into his den to pick up a book to read. Unfortunately, he remembered, he had read every single book there.

He really should pick up some new ones, he told himself.

TV was all repeats.

He got his second novel, *Morning Sickness*, out and proceeded to read it. The book dealt with much autobiographical material from his early marriage years. He was only able to make it part way through before the memories began to catch in his throat. No, best not think of Daphne after her visit.

What to do then?

Somehow, inside him, he had the vague feeling of loneliness — and the stirrings of sexual desire.

Someone knocked at the front door. He opened it, and there stood a woman. A young woman in pale pink slacks and a denim jacket bulging attractively. Her hair was a brownish-

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red. Haggins had always had a weakness for redheads.

"Uhm, uh, I'm so sorry to bother you, mister, but it's my car — it broke down on the road at the bottom of your hill. Can I use your phone to call the town garage?"

"I'm awfully sorry." He gestured to the house's interior. "No phone."

"Oh, dear. Then I guess I won't bother you."

"You're shivering. Please come in, at least for a while. I'd be happy to drive you into town later on. Straight to the garage. First let me get you a cup of coffee. I'll make a fire. Do you like Irish coffee?"

"Oh, gee, mister, that's really *kind* of you. I don't know what to say." Her eyes were blue, flecked with brown.

"Just come in." Quickly, he shut the thick, heavy door behind her and directed her to the living room. She moved with the litheness of the young. Daphne had moved like that, once — all provocative bounces and sleek muscles, flexing deliciously.

Haggins made Irish coffee and the promised fire in the old brick hearth. They sat before it, warming. The fire slid shiny luster down her auburn sheath of hair. She smelled of jasmine.

"How long have you been living here?" she asked.

He frowned at that, saying, "Oh. A while."

"Shall we go upstairs, or do it here?" She stretched languidly. Her brown cashmere slipped up her abdomen, revealing a cute navel.

"Here," he said, sliding his arms around her. "Then upstairs."

When he awoke the next morning, she was gone, of course.

So was his left hand.

As he awakened from the sun's heat searing through the window (funny — shouldn't be so hot), he immediately sensed something wrong. Reflexively, he moved his left arm to tug off the covers, but no hand grasped the sheets. He gazed at where his hand should have been. There was only a stump. A smooth stump. No scars.

This had never happened before. He stared long and hard at the arm, as though to make the hand reappear (a shimmer? a faint ghost of a hand, returning?), but he was not ready for that yet. He was far too shaken. Closing his eyes, he lay back and calmed himself, getting his will power back. Control, he reminded himself. Control was everything.

Control.

Will power.

He leaped from bed and dressed. His writing day was shot without his hand. Just no *way* he was capable of concentrating enough on his work, let alone *type*. Meditation? Yoga? Perhaps that would help.

The air was hot outside. He sat in the bright sun, on the gray-dappled grass in front of the house, and he collected his thoughts. Sometime later, he

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opened his eyes to the panorama spread below the hill.

There was a hole in the sky.

The view seemed nothing more than a painted backdrop of paper — with a hole punched through it revealing only darkness. Martin swallowed the saliva that had collected in his mouth and looked down at the stump. The hand was back, but no fingers. No thumb.

The fact that *part* of it had returned encouraged him despite the unnerving appearance of the sky-hole. Better spend the entire day meditating, concentrating. He performed a sequence of his favorite yoga exercises (a company psychologist had turned him onto these Oriental gymnastics long ago — he found them quite refreshing then, and absolutely invaluable now) and then assumed a lotus position, meditating first on his hand again.

Fingers. Thumb.

Phalanges. Three segments each. Veins, skin, nails.

After a time, his hand was fully returned. He resumed his meditation, concentrating on the ruptured sky.

Sky. Air, atmosphere. Blue, with flecks of fleecy clouds....

His eyes opened. The hole was gone. He sighed with gratification, feeling whole again.

Perhaps it would be necessary to devote at least two days a week in meditation like this. Perhaps *that* was the reason for all his problems lately. Yes. Two days, instead of one.

The sun, its rays now much cooler, verged on setting. The air was back to crispy coolness. Time for his walk down to the mailbox.

Back in the house, he slipped into a light, tan jacket and zipped it up. Just to the left of the closet was his shotgun — 12 gauge. He picked the weapon up by its barrel, cracked it open. In the top drawer of the living room bureau were shells. He selected two and loaded the shotgun. He carried the still-split gun outside.

Not a good day. He may well need it, he told himself. It had been necessary from time to time in the past.

Walking down his gravel drive, past the dark, rustling woods, he considered his former life. Niggling doubts swarmed: questions. Question directed to himself. Perhaps it had been *his* fault, after all, and he had projected his guilt to everyone else. Freedom had a price; he was paying it now, for this perfect freedom.

As a boy he had this fantasy:

In his small, perpetually messy room, a secret passageway would grow. A portal into a spectacularly different existence, away from this oppressive life of indifference and mediocrity. An entire world would unfold to him, all his own. He had a hundred-room palace and exotic servants. A harem of erotic, beautiful women, who obeyed his every whim. There would be no such thing as time. He would not age. The universe would revolve about *him;* he dictated its events. He would

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have power to control the elements, to construct great, towering empires, and then destroy them with total freedom.

Well, he had freedom now, he thought. Freedom from the fetters that had hung on him all his life. Freedom to do what he wished to do.

Except to doubt himself.

From the time he could remember, he *despised* depending on other people. This was *his* life, no one else's. He refused to lean upon normal emotional securities of any sort of belief, political, spiritual or otherwise. The individual he slowly became was to be entirely molded from his self's *will*. And now — now he was starting to fulfill this dream.

There were problems, of course, he reminded himself as he neared the battered mailbox in the cool dark. There should *be* problems. A challenge, after all, was what drove him. If not for some sort of conflict in this solitary life, he would soon fall apart from sheer boredom. He should learn to accept these things that were happening to him and welcome them, for they kept his existence running, kept him on his toes....

A twisted bolt of lightning fissured the night, and the sky began to burn. The writhing flames licked the stars away rapidly. The earth shook beneath him. He flopped onto his face, into the deep earthy smells of the tickling grass. Just ten feet away the ground cracked with a squealing thunder, the far expanse of land falling away as though into a bottomless chasm. Away, away. When the spuming dust cleared, when the fire in the night burned off, there was only darkness. Pitch darkness, beyond black. In front of him now a jagged cliff jutted into the nothingness.

Recovering, the crickets commenced to chirp once more.

In the woods beside him the snickers began.

Grabbing up his shotgun, he clacked it closed, thumbed the safety off and scrabbled to his feet, his head swerving back and forth between the new precipice and the humming, sniggling woods. Fear stung his throat. A vibration rang in his ears. Not safe here — get back to the house.

Even as the thought raced in his mind, a claw hooked onto the chasm's edge; a harsh hiss issued from below. He backed away, bringing up the barrels of the shotgun parallel to the ground. An entire set of claws reached from the nothingness, attaching to the flaking, crumbling ground.

A face appeared, the size of an elephant's: his mother's face, tears leaking from limpid eyes. "Oh, Martin, it's no use," she said in the same tone of her last words to him in St. Mary's County Hospital. "Give up. Give up. It's a lie, Martin. A lie."

His finger twitched on the trigger. The pellets blew one of those hazel eyes into a bloody, oozing mass. The claws lost their hold, and the monster fell away, back into the black, soundlessly.

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Martin spun on his heels and raced up the drive, giving the woods wide berth.

Halfway there, the ghost of his father flickered into existence.

His dead father, the minister, gripping his brown wood pulpit in the heat of an emotional sermon, oblivious to his son. Like a holograph, Martin thought as he stared at the image he had known so well in his youth. The near-bald head bobbed with the rhythmic drone of words; the paunch bulging the black Methodist robe; the dewlaps squeezing out the clerical collar. The thick lips moved. But Martin could hear nothing of what the spectre said.

Startlement overcome, hot anger rushed to his mind.

"Just get out of here, father," he yelled, his left arm trembling with emotion as he brandished a fist. "I have my *own* existence now. I lived twenty-one years, long years, under your tyranny, your sanctimonious authority that you called godly love, that has tortured me ever since." The words streamed easily; he had said them many times to his father in his mind. "I have my *own* existence now, you hear? Mine, not anyone else's. Not yours, not mother's, not Daphne's, not Edgarson Canning, Inc.'s. The choices are mine, and I choose that you not *be* here!"

The image wavered like a reflection in water. Faded.

Breathing heavily, Martin stomped toward the house. The stars shone bright in the sky once more. He was almost afraid to look back as he stood at the doorway — but he did. The panorama had been restored, in all its detail.

Exhausted, he reloaded his shotgun, locked the doors securely, throwing the several bolts on each, and he immediately went to bed.

There was no Saturday morning

Although the alarm clock by his bed said 10:00 a.m., it was still dark outside.

Panicking, he grasped his gun and stormed from the house. Overhead, there was nothing. No sky, no stars, no clouds. The view was gone; the precipice was back, closer to the house. He ran around the house. On all sides it was like this. His property was an island in a sea of nothing. The only lights were from his house and the flashlight he carried.

Suddenly pieces of paper began to flutter down from above: cards.

They tumbled over his head like paper rain. He caught one, examined it by the flashlight, and he screamed, "No!"

and he shook his fists at the nothingness. "No! You won't have me. I have power. You *can't* have me! It's impossible. I'm *me!* Watch what I can do!"

Yes, he thought. A display of his might. That would show it — that would keep the outside away. He turn-

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ed his attention back to his house and focused his will. The lights within began to glow brighter. Scintillations spilled out in great rays that lit the darkness well beyond the edges of the drifting island. Slowly, the house transformed. Grew. Soon it was a tall, broad castle — no, a *palace* studded with fiery rubies and fixed with thousands of varied gems, all glittering from a great light within. Perfumes and incense wafted; lovely chants from female voices filled the bright air.

"I'm Martin Haggins, the most brilliant writer of all time!" he bellowed into the blackness. "Look at what I've written." Books bound in leather with pages of gold appeared at his feet. "The awards that I have won!" Suddenly the grassy ground sprouted silver plaques and turquoise trophies. "I can do *anything*," he shouted hoarsely. "Anything. Don't you understand, you can't *have* me!"

In the dark woods the snickers began again, and Martin realized they were only echoes of his own voice.

Soon there was no time.

Martin Haggins sat in the middle of his little island. Sat because he had no legs on which to stand. That was all right; there was nowhere to walk. His property had been swallowed by the surrounding outer dark. He sat upright in his chair, and sometimes he would moan, but most times he was quiet, not wanting to waste energy. At times, when he felt okay, when he seemed to feel his power coursing back, he would grow back his legs and feet. He could extend the boundaries of his island, even take pleasure in existence.

But now he sat in the dun-colored overstuffed chair, without legs, amidst the last piece of his house. His property extended only ten feet away from him on all sides now; an almost perfect circle. It was necessary to remain awake at all times now, he knew, or things would fall apart further. Even now, he realized, his left arm was growing gangrenous and maggoty; he would have to concentrate on that, soon.

Out in the dark he would from time to time see images he did not believe were of his own making. Brief flashes of daily life in places of his former life: people he knew, people he did not know, hustling about, threading their lives in idiosyncratic patterns. But mostly, there was only the dark, spotted here and there with small, barely visible spots of ectoplasmic clouds....

And the moans....

He speculated on his past life now, as he often did, when the familiar card took form on what remained of his lap, face down. He picked it up, looked at it, knowing what it said, now beginning to accept what it said:

IN MEMORY OF MARTIN WILSON HAGGINS: 1934-1973. REST IN PEACE.

He did not even have the energy left to toss it away.

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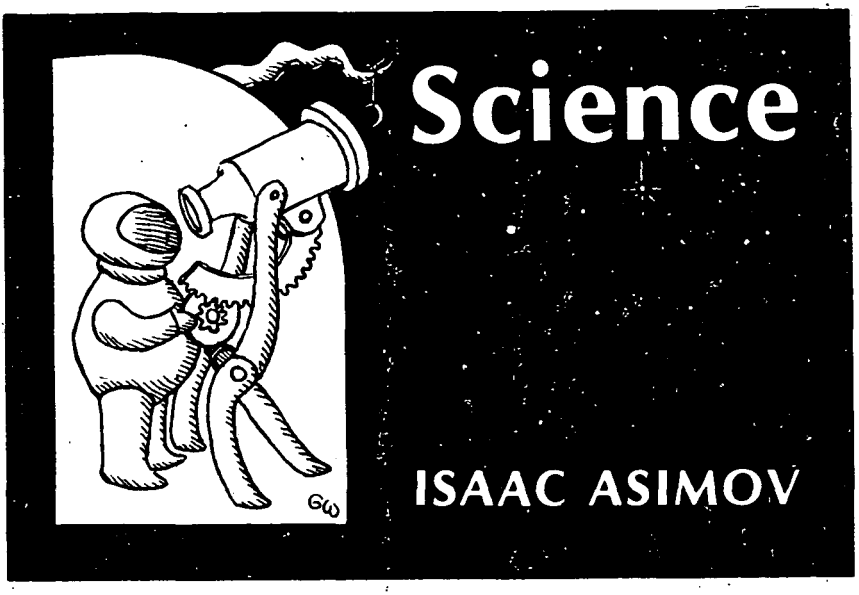

NICE GUYS FINISH FIRST

Naturally, I receive a good deal of mail from people I do not know who tell me what they think of me and my work. The vast majority of such mail is complimentary or, at the very least, polite. For this, I am endlessly grateful.

There is, however, a small group of letters that, for one reason or another, represent disapproval — and impolite disapproval at that. The problem then arises as to how to deal with these.

Alas, my reaction is invariably one of anger. Not, of course, at the disapproval (I don't expect to be approved of by one and all) but the impoliteness, the sarcasm, the heavy-handed satire, and so on*.

Well, then, I have worked out a system. In almost every case, I stop reading the letter when I realize it will anger me, for I don't enjoy anger. Having stopped reading it, I naturally don't answer.

**Truth compels me to admit that I am sometimes impolite, sarcastic, and heavy-handed in my own writing, but I try increasingly not to be, and I think the tendency to be so is waning.*

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If, by any chance, I do finish the letter because it holds a horrid fascination for me, I strive, nevertheless, not to answer. I simply file it with my papers generally (which, for reasons known only to itself and the All-Knowing Computer in the Sky, Boston University collects with total lack of discrimination).

If I *must* answer, or blow a fuse, I write a sardonic and bitter answer, calling on my not inconsiderable supply of non-vulgar invective. Then I carefully place the answer in an envelope, seal it and stamp it. It is amazing how that discharges the venom. Of course, once the venom is discharged, there is no need to mail the letter. I tear it up, carefully destroying the stamp as I do so. (Unless, I go to the full trouble of writing an answer, including the irrevocable demolition of a stamp, I do not feel the spiritual boil to have been properly lanced.)

If, by any chance, an answer should be absolutely required, the writing and destruction of the first letter makes it possible to write a second, milder letter or, even, if necessary, a third, still milder letter. When a proper level of politeness is reached, I mail it*.

I don't believe this behavior of mine is confined to myself or is nothing but a peculiar and useless quirk. I think it's a rather general kind of reaction by the more civilized members of our species.

As a whole, we are all quick to anger and ache to meet each blow with a harder counter-blow. As we grow older, wiser and more experienced, however, we reach the stage where we first judge whether the blow is really damaging, and if it is, we respond with the least energy required to disinfect the consequences.

This increase of mildness with age (or wisdom — the two are not identical, I suppose) is required of anyone who would aspire to the title of "nice guy," and this is something to which I do indeed aspire.

And why do I aspire to it? Out of an inhuman virtue and saintliness?

Certainly not! I want the title out of selfish ambition. I happen to think that in the long run (despite Leo Durocher) nice guys finish first, and what I *really* want is to finish first.

Let me explain what I mean.

When we consider those animal species which have a level of intelli-

**Only once that I can remember was I so furious that I wrote a second letter still more insulting than the first, and then mailed it. It accomplished nothing, and there may be a moral to that.*

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gence high enough to make it appear to us that their actions are not motivated purely by instinct, we are tempted to personify. We wish upon them human methods of thought, imagining that they freely choose or decide to do this or that.

Under these conditions, we sometimes cannot help feel chagrined, for it would appear that *Homo sapiens* is a particularly vicious species, that it alone among the animals fights needlessly to the death, that it alone seems to take pleasure in killing and in knowingly inflicting pain.

The "lower" animals, it would appear, fight over immediate matters of dispute: a specific piece of food, a specific mating opportunity, a specific territory. One of the competitors wins and one loses, the decision being reached with minimum violence, almost always far short of death or even of serious damage. Sometimes a conflict of threats is all that is needed. The loser leaves the scene and that conflict is ended.

Why are human beings so different? Why so combative? Why so deadly? And since they are, and since they rule the earth, is it a case of nasty guys finishing first?

Suppose we consider the difference between human beings and other animals. Surely there is a difference in intelligence to begin with. Human beings have considerable more brain power than other animals, and we may well be the only animals with a true time-sense, as a consequence of that intelligence. Does that make a difference?

Well, when an animal fights for a specific object, he is a creature of the present only. If the specific object disappears as when the competing animal manages to bolt down the food, or the prospective mate flees, or when the animal judges himself to be the lower and flees — it is all over. With the goal, or the enemy, or both, out of sensory range, the reason for combat is over, and neither the memory of past combat nor the anticipation of future combat serves to disturb the equanimity of the now peaceful moment. (I don't say that a sufficiently intelligent animal doesn't remember or anticipate at all, but I think it does not do so sharply enough to disturb a peaceful present.)

Suppose though, that intelligence advances to the point where the time-sense becomes a major importance, when both memory and anticipation is strong and ever-present.

In such a case, if X fights Y, X remembers past fights in which Y has troubled him or even perhaps thwarted him and X anticipates further trouble of the sort in the future.

The intensity of the combat is bound to rise, then, as X strives not mere-

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ly to drive Y away or to gain an immediate goal, but to inflict a defeat great enough to make up for past trouble and, perhaps, to ward off future trouble.

If, indeed, Y has given X *enough* trouble, then X may get ready to fight the moment it senses the presence of Y, even if there is no immediate goal that would make victory meaningful.

It may even be that the memory of past defeats is so strongly and continually painful that X will, even without any cause whatever and without the presence of Y to act as a trigger, deliberately plan conflict in the future (under conditions favorable to himself) in order to restore the balance.

Even if X were victor in a combat, but only narrowly so, he might have the intelligence to anticipate the possibility of actual defeat the next time, and deliberately seek out conflict (under conditions favorable to himself) to inflict an overwhelming defeat once and for all — to inflict death, if possible, and end the problem.

In short, the growth of intelligence is bound to introduce new motives for conflict — shame, apprehension, desire for revenge or for security — all of which do not involve an immediate quarrel and cannot be satisfied by a minimal victory.

It may be, then, that human beings are nastier than other animals, not because they are reasonlessly nasty, but because they are more intelligent than other animals. Intelligence itself inevitably heightens the viciousness of conflict.*

There is another quality that seems to go along with increasing intelligence, and that is an increasing ability to bend the Universe to one's will by taking advantage (wittingly or unwittingly) of the way in which the Universe works. Intelligence, to put it another way, can imply the development of a technology.

It takes considerable intelligence to do this on a significant scale, and only *Homo sapiens*, in the more than 3-billion-year history of life on Earth, has developed enough intelligence (in either quantity, or quality, or both) to develop a significant technology.

By technology, human beings develop tools to extend and refine their natural abilities to influence their environment and put these tools at the service of their propensity for violence against each other.

Conflict between human beings becomes not merely the interplay of

What about the dolphins, which are intelligent and yet peaceful? We don't know them well enough, yet, to be sure of the true extent of either characteristic.

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arms, feet, heads, teeth and nails, but of rocks, bones, clubs, knives, spears, arrows, and so on indefinitely.

It is plain to see that the more intelligent a species becomes and the longer it remains intelligent, the greater the damage it can do to its own members, to other species, and to the world generally.

Naturally, human beings as they grow more intelligent or gather greater experience, or both, can learn to repair the damage done by conflict and to do so more rapidly and effectively.

Yet does the ability to repair keep step with the ability to destroy? It would seem that as technology grows more complex, it also grows more vulnerable, so that even as the ability to destroy increases rapidly, the difficulties of repair also mount. From that, we might deduce that the capacity for destruction is bound to outstrip the capacity for repair. Sooner or later, then, the technology will be destroyed, probably civilization along with it and, just possibly, humanity itself as well.

Even if humanity survives, it may lack the capacity to restore an advanced technology because of the disappearance of cheap and easy sources of energy. And if we do restore an advanced technology, it will only be to court destruction again.

The final conclusion would seem to be, then, that the kind of intelligence that leads to technology is self-limiting and even self-destructive not only on Earth but, presumably, on any world in which such an intelligence has evolved.

The Universe, in that case, may have witnessed the rise of countless civilizations which are now all dead, except for a few like ours that are too young yet to have died but are soon fated to do so. (I referred to this briefly, by the way, in WHERE IS EVERYBODY? F&SF, December 1978.)

And perhaps uncounted numbers of civilizations are yet to arise during the remaining lifetime of the Universe, only to die quickly in their turn.

Nasty guys, in other words, whatever their short-term success, in the long run finish last.

But wait —

So far I have only considered the nastiness of *Homo sapiens*, its propensity for cut-throat competition and conflict. Are there no compensating factors that can alter the dismal conclusion I have just reached?

For one thing, not all competition and conflict is bad. There is the useful competition to reach a creditable goal first for some reward that does not imply direct physical harm to the loser.

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Even malignant conflict has its beneficial side effects. In the crucible of war, great self-sacrifice is demanded and obtained while the records seem to show that the arts and sciences flourish in times of stress.

Yet surely that is not enough. If conflicts grow steadily more deadly with time, the point is bound to be reached where no possible beneficial side effect of the spirit of competition can possibly make up for the destruction.

Still, in talking about the self-sacrifice demanded in war, I'm talking about cooperation. If conflict is "nasty" then cooperation is "nice," and surely *Homo sapiens* has the capacity for "niceness," too.

Just as not all competition is malignant so not all cooperation is beneficent. The cooperation of the beehive or the anthill, which destroys the capacity for individual initiative and creativity and limits the potentiality for diversity may keep a species alive but slows, or even stops, the growth of a technology. If such a cooperation does not lead to death, it may lead to death-in-life, which is not much better.

The type of cooperation fostered by conflict, which must be aimed entirely at making victory more probable is rather beehivish in nature, as anyone who has been in the armed forces can attest, and is not my idea of beneficent cooperation.

Is it possible to have cooperation, but of a looser kind that leaves room for individuality and even for non-malignant competition?

Perhaps cooperation does not arise as easily as competition does, but competition leads to war, and I have already said that war leads to cooperation of a sort. Even primitive war does.

If a species is intelligent enough to have memory and foresight, individuals who have suffered defeat or who fear future defeat may see the value of seeking allies. Thus, if X is defeated by Y, X and Z together may nevertheless defeat Y.

The development of the notion of cooperation is not just a likelihood but a virtual certainty, at least for *Homo sapiens*. While gorillas and orangutans are loners, chimpanzees are tribal, and undoubtedly, the hominids were tribal from the start.

Tribes have other uses than self-defense even among animals of only moderate intelligence. They can become hunting bands, for instance.

One human being, even armed with a spear or a bow-and-arrow, can do nothing to a mammoth but watch from a very safe distance. A cooperating group of human beings, armed each with similar primitive weapons,

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can destroy a mammoth, and, indeed, such hunting groups managed, long before the birth of civilization, to drive these magnificent creatures to extinction — as well as other large, but insufficiently intelligent species.

Of all tribal species, only *Homo sapiens* developed a technology, and, as it happens, there is very little in the way of technology that a single human being, starting from scratch can develop. A group of human beings, with diverse talents, is much more likely to have the succession of ingenious ideas that bring about the growth of technology.

Not only that, but the growth of technology seems to require, inevitably, the development of larger and larger cooperating groups to maintain that technology at its existing level and to bring about further growth.

The development of agriculture required a large population of sedentary farmers not only to till the fields and weed and hoe and sow and reap and do all the work required to produce a year's supply of food, but also to make the implements needed, to construct and maintain the irrigation ditches, to build walled cities and collect armaments to protect themselves from surrounding tribes who, not having sown, would be glad to collect the reapings by force.

Fortunately, the development of agriculture made it possible to support a larger population than would have been possible without it. In general, it has been true that advances in technology have both produced and used a larger and denser population than before.

To make the technology work, moreover — and this is the crucial point — there must be cooperation at least over a political unit large enough to be economically useful. Through history, as technology has advanced, the size of these economic units has necessarily increased from tribal patches, to city-states, to nations, to empires.

Within these units cooperation has been brought about, despite the natural tendency to destructive competition, by the application of governmental authority, internal police, and, most of all, the strictures of custom, social pressure and religion.

The general advance in the size of the units within which cooperation is maintained has, at the present day, produced governmental control over a population of 950,000,000 people in China; 22,000,000 square kilometers of area in the Soviet Union; and one-third of the real wealth of the world in the United States.

The advance has not been smooth and steady. The stresses of internal decay and external pressure have led to the fall of empires and the periodic destruction of central authority and its replacement by smaller units. Such

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periods of regression usually result in a "dark age"*.

Today, the world undergoes centrifugal decomposition politically, as the old European empires break up and as cultural minorities demand nations all their own — but economic units continue to grow larger, and the only economic unit that makes sense today is the whole planet.

In one way, it's the political units that count, for it is they who wage war. Though peace is maintained within the units (if we ignore endemic crime and violence, and occasional terrorism, rebellion and civil war) there is war between them.

City-states warred against each other interminably in ancient Greece and in Renaissance Italy; feudal estates did so in medieval Europe and early modern Japan; nations did so in early medieval China and modern Europe, and in all cases until modern times there were conflicts with barbarians on the fringes.

The intensity and destructiveness of the conflicts shows a general rise with advancing technology, so that despite the growing size of the units within which cooperation can be counted on, competitiveness may still win out. Destruction still threatens to outpace the capacity for recovery.

We now live at a time when the outcome clearly hangs in the balance. One more all-out general war and civilization will probably be destroyed — possibly for good.

Indeed, even if the realization of this keeps the war from happening, the existence of potential conflict keeps the minds and energy of all the competing nations on each other as the enemy and *not* on those true enemies which threat us all: overpopulation, resource depletion, and technological inadequacy.

Nasty guys will finish last.

How to prevent that? We have reached the point where we can no longer afford armed competition; nor can we afford to have competition preoccupy us so that we cannot truly cooperate to solve global problems. There must be sufficient international cooperation to serve as the equivalent of the world government (though that should entail as much local

**There are people who, disturbed by "big government" today and its tendency to curb the advantages they might gain if their competitiveness were allowed free flow, demand "less government." Alas, there is no such thing as less government, merely changes in government. If the libertarians had their way, the distant bureaucracy would vanish and the local bully would be in charge. Personally, I prefer the distant bureaucracy which may not find me, over the local bully who certainly will. And all historical precedent shows such a change to be for the worse.*

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autonomy as is consistent with global success).

This is needed not only to avoid destruction, but to allow technology to continue to grow and improve. The time has come when projects are possible which can use and, indeed, must use the whole effort of the global economy and population. To solve our problems involving population, energy, pollution (yes, even a peaceful technology has destructive side-effects that must be reversed) a global effort is required, and I believe that in every case the penetration and exploitation of space as the enlarged sphere of human activity is essential.

It is my feeling that civilization will not survive and space will not be conquered without a working global cooperation among the nations, and that it is possible for the peoples of the Earth to choose to indulge in such a cooperation. They may *not* choose to, but they can if they wish to. If they want to be nice guys, they can be, and nice guys will finish first.

I can also maintain the converse. I believe that any planetary civilization which reaches the stage of space exploration and exploitation will have learned to handle the tendency to destructive conflict that, so far, has seemed inseparable from intelligence. They will have learned to be nice guys.

If they haven't, they will have remained bound to their planetary surfaces and will have decayed. In fact, in all likelihood, they will have destroyed themselves.

It is for this reason that I do not fear contact with extraterrestrial civilizations. If we get to them, we will be stronger, and have nothing to fear (nor they from us since we will be peaceful people). If they get to us, and *they* are strong, *they* will be peaceful people.

Yet can we be sure? Would a civilization that has learned to live at peace with itself perhaps not hesitate at a conflict with an extra-planetary civilization? Might they not even welcome a chance to exercise their repressed delight in destruction?

Why should they? That is judging a true civilization from the standpoint of our own barbarism.

For instance — We have one case of a superior civilization crossing space to visit other, possible life-bearing worlds. The case of ourselves.

Our instruments have landed on the Moon, on Mars, on Venus, and have made close approaches to Mercury, Jupiter, and Saturn. In the case of the Moon, at least, some of the instruments contained human beings.

What's more, the intruders on or near other worlds, are not individuals from a planetary civilization, but are ourselves, *Homo sapiens*, from a

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world full of conflict, hatred and destructiveness.

How have we behaved? For one thing, the nations of the Earth, notably the United States and the Soviet Union, have behaved with surprising cooperation in the space effort. Each maintains spy satellites, and there is talk (only talk) of killer satellites, but there is cooperation, free flow of information, and no signs of attempt to do deliberate harm.

And how did we behave toward possible life on other worlds? We acted with the greatest circumspection. We sterilized our vessels at enormous expense so that we might not unwittingly introduce Earthly organisms that might harm any native life. We *protected* that life with all our might even though we knew it was most sure to be unintelligent and primitive, and very likely was not there at all.

Yes, we did it out of self-interest. We wanted to study those life-forms to gain knowledge and perhaps to turn that knowledge to our own benefit.

That, however, is equivalent to saying that altruism is to our own long-term selfish benefit — which is exactly what I've been saying all through this essay.

Nice guys finish first.

Biological evolution teaches it and human history teaches it, and whether we learn it *in time* is the great question of the moment.

Coming Soon

Next month: "The Merry Men of Methane" a new science fiction novella by Stephen Tall, in which the crew of Earth's first starship, The *Stardust*, searches for an elusive alien life-form on Methane II. The May issue is on sale April 1.

Soon: We have several striking stories on hand from writers who are fairly new to this field, e.g., Michael Shea, Felix Gotschalk, Glen Cook and R. M. Lamming. Plus some fine tales from long-time contributors such as Thomas Disch, Mack Reynolds, Walter Tevis, John Brunner, Richard Cowper and Ron Goulart. Please note the subscription coupon on page 62.

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Gregory Jeffries is an inventor and businessman who died in 2009 and was reborn in 1978. Perhaps reborn is the wrong word; Mr. Jeffries was returned to this world a few years ago. Let him tell his incredible and fascinating story himself....

Independence Day

BY

GREGORY G. JEFFRIES

Of course I can't be sure, but this is probably more or less the way my obituary appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Fortune* magazine, and so on, after my death in October of 2009:

JEFFRIES, Gregory Gayne. Died Friday, October 15, in Doctors Hospital, New York City, aged 61, of emphysema and related complications, after a lingering illness.

Inventor and businessman Gregory Jeffries was born in New Rochelle, N.J., on August 25, 1948, and educated at MIT and Harvard Business School. In 1975, with partner Whitney Baker, he founded a small firm, Jeffco, to manufacture and market electronic devices of his own invention. The highly successful Jeffco made a mutually advantageous merger with Textron, Inc., in 1979. At his death, Jeffries was a consultant to the Jeffco Division and an honorary board member of the Textron conglomerate.

In 1973, Jeffries married Dinah Cooper Marbury. The union was without issue and ended in divorce in 1981. In the later years of his semi-retirement from the business world, Jeffires divided his residence between a Manhattan townhouse and a South Carolina offshore island estate. He is survived by his second wife, Vera (Schell) Jeffries, whom he married February 29, 2000.

Except for the young-man-makes-good aspect, you might say there is little remarkable in all that. What I find remarkable is that I am writing it — and *why* I am writing it — reconstructing a life story that ended in 2009 — on this balmy Wednesday evening of June 21, 1978.

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* * *

If I were a professional writer, I daresay I would flesh out that bare-bones obituary a bit. I daresay many periodicals in fact did. *People* magazine probably related how the Dinah Marbury whom young Greg Jeffries married in 1973 had been his one and only love since their schooldays together. How in 1980 Greg's beautiful wife Dinah and his business partner Whit Baker ran away — together — from the man-too-eager-to-make-good. How Greg Jeffries, after twenty years as a lonely and embittered divorcé, wrily made a leap-year proposal to his long-time housekeeper and married poor dreary Vera just so there'd be *somebody* to inherit his fortune.

Those things happened, as I know only too well. But how can I make anyone in this anno Domini 1978 believe such a story? All I can credibly tell is what has happened since I woke up — since I came back to life — this morning, this 21st of June, thirty-one years before I died.

The first thing I noticed, even before I opened my eyes, was that I was breathing. And breathing right down deep into my lungs, the air no longer stopping as if choked by damp cotton wool packed somewhere in the vicinity of my collarbone. Then I opened my eyes, to find myself no longer slung in that cat's cradle of IV tubes, respirator tubes, drainage tubes. I was no longer in the antiseptic hospital suite full of robot machinery, but in a homey bedroom on a sunny morning, and the doctor leaning over me was not one of the numerous and anonymous specialists, but old friend Harbison. My mind was clear; evidently the brain atrophy of oxygen-deprivation had somehow been reversed. But of course I didn't instantly realize the full magnitude of what had occurred. I thought at that moment that I had merely been snatched back from the *brink* of death.

"I'll be goddamned," I said, hardly the best chosen First Words of one resurrected from the grave. (Even as a boy addict of horror movies, I never could understand why the revivified mummy or zombie always came back to life so full of malevolence and grudges. Why didn't it rejoice at having been given a second go-round?) To Harbison I said, "How'd you do it, Bert?"

He grinned and shrugged. "Lose a few, win a few."

"But..the last I remember," I said, struggling to remember, "they were talking about a matter of hours...."

"They?" he said, cocking a bushy eyebrow. "Well, one of these times it *will* be a near thing, if juggernaut Jeffries persists in waiting until he's got a sustained temp of one oh four before he calls his pillpusher."

Now I knew there was something fluky. Numbers were my business, and vesicular emphysema was my disease. Fever is not one of its terminal symp-

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toms, and I could still hear that unemotional voice: "Vital signs diminishing ... marked cyanosis ... temperature ninety-four and falling...."

"Come on, Bert," I insisted, and the strong timbre of my voice surprised me. More softly, I repeated, "How did you do it?"

"Because you demanded I do it," he said, a trifle irritably. "Hard-driving Greg. Get me in shape for Wednesday's conference, *or else!* Just like one of those old-time Chinese emperors. Pay the physician a retainer as long as he keeps you healthy, and then behead him if he lets you get the flu."

"A conference?" I said. "The flu?"

"And every damned influenza that comes along these days is the newest subtype that's leapfrogged the newest antibiotics. No great sweat, though, in a chap your age, except to avert pulmonary complications. Nevertheless —"

"Bert," I said, raising a hand (effortlessly!) to interrupt him. "Are you trying to pretend that influenza was all —?" And then I noticed my hand. No scaly skin, no ropy veins, no brown liver spots.

"Nevertheless," Dr. Harbison went on, "you don't exactly have the lungs of a marathon runner. Could give you trouble, later in life, or if you get another bug like this one. I say again: knock off those three decks a day, or whatever you're smoking now. I'd also recommend not living in this North Jersey smog."

"Jersey?" I echoed. I hadn't lived in New Jersey since....

I looked around the room and recognized it: the elegant bedroom in the Englewood house we'd bought when we first married. We had lived there for five years, until the once squeaky-clean suburb was permeated by the effluvia of the industrial areas. We had sold (at a loss) and moved out to....

There came a light tap at the closed door.

"Come in, hon!" Bert called. "He's still groggy, but functional."

I stared as she came in, a large leather-bound book under her arm. She was not the woman who had earlier held devoted vigil at my deathbed, her face hanging over me like a melancholy moon. It was not my elderly wife Vera. It was my wife Dinah, blue-eyed and golden-haired, looking exactly (exactly as young and lovely!) as when I had seen her last. That night of the last quarrel. That night before the morning I found her tear-stained farewell note. (I still have it — I mean, I did until I died — her monogrammed and perfumed notepaper still breathing a trace of her fragrance nearly thirty years afterward.) Now here she was, still young, still near, still dear.

"Good morning, darling," she said, with a smile. "Feeling better?"

"No, don't kiss him," the doc cautioned. "Let him risk infecting his fellow tycoons, but not you."

She had bent toward me. Now she withdrew, still smiling, her eyes tender

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with wifely concern. I waited anxiously for her face to register some recognition of my aged decrepitude. When it didn't, I said shakily, "Bert — Dinah — is there a mirror handy?"

She brought me one from the dresser. With dread but compelling curiosity, I raised it in front of me. Gone were the tired and worried lines, the pouches, the jowls, the gray hair and complexion. I had not just come back; I had shed thirty years on the way.

"All right, Bert," I said, as firmly as I could. "I'll grant a family GP couldn't have done it. But who did? And how?"

"I don't claim you're ready to try out for the Olympics," he growled. "Attend that damned conference today, if you must. But then you get right back here to bed again. Rest for a week at least. I'll be looking in."

I thought of all the things I had heard and read, of old men reluctant to perish, and how they had tried to circumvent death. Having themselves put in suspended animation until some Future when medicine could cure their ills or halt the aging process. Having replicas of themselves cloned from a single one of their cells. Astronomically expensive attempts at immortality, and I'd never heard of one succeeding. But I had had the money to try, and Vera was not greedy to inherit. Maybe I had been incapable of a desperate plea for a desperate measure, but she could have....

Why did Dr. Harbison keep evading my question? I suddenly remembered something, and blurted it out: "Bert, you died in 1997."

"I should hope to God," he said indifferently. "I'll be going on eighty by then, and no doubt still working my ass off."

"I was a pallbearer at your funeral!"

He and Dinah exchanged an enigmatic glance. The doc shrugged again and told her, "Sometimes a high fever can cause hallucination, even quirks of amnesia. It'll pass."

"Amnesia!" I exclaimed, and laughed. "What's the opposite of amnesia, doc? When you remember *more* than should be normal?"

"Well, that's one symptom of hebephrenic schizophrenia," he said. "But that has never been caused by any flu virus. Anyway, it's out of my field." He snapped the catches of his black bag. "When you're back on your feet, I'll refer you to a good shrink."

"Bert, this is me!" I almost pleaded. "Whatever happened was done to me. And I must have paid a wad for it. Surely I've got a right to know. Hell, it must have made the medical journals, if not the *Times'* front page."

Dinah looked at me a little worriedly, but Harbison merely pretended to scribble a headline in the air: "How I Cured My First Millionaire of E-Strain Influenza. Yessir, I've made my name and fame. Got to rush off now, Greg, and sign up Farrah Fawcett to be my new receptionist."

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The door closed behind him, and Dinah and I gazed at each other. A lot of things were going through my mind. If what had apparently happened to me had really happened, it was damned near being a miracle. There should have been an uproar, not a cloak of silence about it. Or was this just one last delirium as I lay dying in Doctors Hospital thirty miles and thirty years from here? No, it was too circumstantially detailed to be a dream. Besides, one of the things going through my mind was that this was the first time Dinah and I had been together in a bedroom in all those same thirty years.

I might have followed that thought with a suggestion not exactly suitable for a sickroom. But she scotched the notion when she said, "Hawley's already waiting with the car. If you must go, and Bert says you can, you'd better be getting dressed."

I grumbled, "This must be one important conference."

She came and laid the leather-bound book on my lap. It was a daily-appointments diary, and I was by now hardly surprised to see the year gold-tooled on the cover: *1978*. She opened it to the page headed *Wednesday, June 21*.

"An almighty important conference," I said, "if we've convened it on a holiday."

Dinah gave me a quizzical look and asked — irrelevantly, I thought — "Have you been having a midsummer night's dream, Greg?"

The page was divided according to the morning and afternoon hours. In the slot allotted to *11:00 a.m.* was neatly written a list of names — I even recognized the handwriting of my then secretary, Ruby Samuels, deceased 1983 — the names of those with whom I was meeting today.

"Yes, I remember," I said. "The opening negotiations for the Textron merger."

"Do you feel well enough to cope?" Dinah asked.

"Well, I did, didn't I?" She gave me another look, not an entirely happy one. I said, "Would you rather I hadn't? I mean didn't?"

"You know how I feel about it."

"The same as Whit Baker does?" I probed.

"I wouldn't know how Whit feels. It's been two years since he moved out to open the West Coast office. Can I help you dress?"

"No, thanks, dear. I'm in the pink. I'll manage. What's your own schedule for the day?"

"Only the hairdresser," she sighed. "I'll take my own car. I should be home about the same time you are."

"Promise?" I asked. Her ivory forehead crinkled in some perplexity. "Promise you'll be home?"

"Why in the world shouldn't I? But is there some urgency about it?"

"Since it all went — if it all goes well at the conference, we ought to celebrate," I said awkwardly. "In some way. Some private way." Her look

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made me feel like a callow collegian trying clumsily to seduce a girl on the first date. Abashed, I could only mumble, "It's been a long time."

"You've been ill," she said matter-of-factly. "You may be tired when you get back from New York. But I'll put a bottle of champagne to chill."

I studied the papers in my attaché case and kept the glass partition up between me and chauffeur Hawley — (deceased 1980, along with the Mercedes, when he went for a drunken joyride in it on his day off) — while he drove me across the George Washington Bridge and into midtown Manhattan. All was familiar to me, though a lot of long-gone landmark buildings still stood, and a lot of newer ones hadn't been built yet. The only thing odd was the crowds of people on the streets, obviously bent on business. As I remember, most of them would have been lolling at home or on the beaches today.

Except for that small anomaly, my sense of disorientation — even my feeling of awed wonderment — was wearing off. It was like replaying a long-misplaced but well-remembered videocassette. I recognized every one of the old office gang, and they evinced no surprise at seeing me. Or seeing me alive. Or seeing me in my former aspect of thirty-year-old "boy wizard of electronics."

In my office, Ruby told me, "They're assembling in the conference room, but there's a slight delay. Michaelman is held up at Textron, waiting for some Xeroxes to be run off that should've been done days ago."

"I'll make a note to comment acidly on Textron efficiency," I said. "You never know what slightest advantage might win you a major concession. Do I have a few minutes free, then?"

"Yes. They're all occupied with coffee and Danish."

"Then ask what's-his-name — that young hotshot who handles our hospital-equipment contracting —"

"Rolf Erikssen."

"Yes. Ask him if he can spare me a quick confab."

"What can I do for you, chief?" he asked, as soon as he was in my office.

"I have a couple of hypothetical questions, Rolf, that ought to be in your line. The way I've heard it, if a man is incurably ill, he can be preserved — a sort of life-suspension process — until science catches up with whatever's killing him. Then he's awakened and cured. Right?"

"Well, that's the theory. There was quite a fad for it, for a while, and the labs are still in business. I suppose there are quite a few old coots tucked away in those freezers, waiting for the resurrection. I bet it's costing the heirs their inheritance, if not causing them apoplexy."

"Suppose the old coot says screw the heirs and screw the cost. Would it work?"

"Who knows? A guy wouldn't opt

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for cryogenic hibernation unless he's already a hopeless case. For hopeless, read cancer. And there haven't been any recent cancer-cure breakthroughs. So I haven't heard of anybody being revived lately for any revolutionary treatment."

"If it worked, Rolf — on me, say — would I come awake with all my faculties and memories intact? Would I remember everything prior to the time I got freeze-dried or whatever the hell they do?"

"I'd assume so. Er, chief, is this confidential? Are you, er, ailing?"

"No," I said, but Erikssen's expression indicated that he wasn't too sure. "What would I look like, after revival? Would I look younger?"

"No. How could you? The process only slows your metabolism Your heart beats once a week or something like that. But the aging goes on, however slowly. And I'd imagine being stashed in an icebox for years or centuries wouldn't improve you. Even if you came out good for another lifetime, you'd probably come out bent with rheumatism and wrinkled like a prune."

"Okay, then that wasn't involved," I muttered, "even if there was some way to account for the clock turning backward." Erikssen goggled at me. I asked him, "What about cloning?" and his eyeballs practically ping-ponged across the desk at me. "How far have they got with that?"

He swallowed and said, "Practically perfected, chief, if you want a lot of identical frogs and asparagus. There's been considerable horseshit published about *human* clones, but if you're thinking of populating the world with Gregory Jeffries, it's still in the realm of science fiction."

"So was a moon landing, ten years ago. But a human clone is not an impossibility?"

"Hell, nothing's an impossibility. As Oppenheimer once said, the amount of scientific knowledge is *doubling* every seven years or so. That's a geometric progres—"

"What will be the state of the art in, say, the year 2000?"

"Chief, that art deals with germ plasm and DNA and nutrient soups, not electronics. Not yet, anyway. I couldn't even make an educated guess."

"Assuming that a human's identical clone *could* be grown, identical in every particular, would it have the host human's identical memories?"

Rolf Erikssen, beginning to perspire slightly, thought about it and finally said, "I don't see how. A clone could have only the most rudimentary instincts basic to any human being. The instinctive fear of falling, for instance. Not meaning to be impudent, chief, but if I'm talking right now to a clone of Gregory Jeffries, can you tell me what the real Greg and I were talking about last week, before the flu took you out of action?"

"Our last talk? Weren't we dis-

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cussing a feedback problem in that new spectrum-analyzer we're developing for Houston Diagnostic?"

"Yeah," Rolf said, and added drily, "you're not a clone."

Ruby announced that Michaelman had arrived with the overdue Xeroxes and that the conference awaited only me. She and I paused in the doorway, while I scanned the men and women seated around the long zebra-wood table. I had no trouble recognizing Jeffco's own executives, or Forbush and Michaelman and Carrara from Textron. There were a couple of additional and minor Textron flunkies whose names I had never bothered to catch, and so would be excused for not remembering.

"Whit Baker's not here," I said quietly to Ruby.

She looked surprised. "He told you he wouldn't be. Remember?" She seemed slightly embarrassed. "He said he'll come in from California for the final signatures, when and if. But he said — er — he'd be damned if he'd help you scuttle Jeffco."

"Scuttle!" I snorted. "Jeffco heads for the heights, and Whit can't take the altitude."

Ruby made no comment. We took our seats, and the assemblage waited politely for me to open the proceedings.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen," I said, "some of you might call it bad timing that we've convened this conference on Independence Day." There were some blank looks. "But I call it timely, in the sense that we're here to determine how much independence Jeffco can maintain when it's merged into the world's biggest conglomerate." The blank looks turned to comprehension, and there were a few appreciative chuckles.

No need for me to recount the conference in detail. The general terms were to be such-and-such. The details of this-and-that remained to be ironed out by our separate law firms. The SEC could be expected to take so-and-so much time to study and approve the merger. Et cetera. For me, again, it was like replaying an antique videocassette. No, it was more like playing chess against Capablanca, from an old book of his tournament games, where I had only to look down the page to know his White's next moves. The only thing that could change the outcome of the game would be for me to make a Black move that wasn't on the page. This conference was just the first of many that would culminate in the Jeffco-Textron amalgamation; I played it by the book that I had helped write this day thirty years ago.

Afterward I took Ruby back to my corner office, to dictate a few further notes — and to scrawl a few reminders-to-myself in my desk calendar. When that was done, I leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes. The

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more trivial business out of the way, I could return to meditating on the one great, overriding question: how had I, strangling by millimeters in the year 2009, suddenly come to be what and where and *when* I now found myself? If it was revivification and/or rejuvenation — if it had been accomplished by some yet-to-be-discovered mode of medicine or hypnosis or time travel — evidently no one among my acquaintances knew of it. Or would admit it. But there had to be a clue someplace. Then it occurred to me:

"There's one piece of the puzzle missing," I said aloud.

"Sir?"

My eyes snapped open. I had totally ignored poor Ruby, still sitting there waiting to be dismissed. "And on a holiday, too," I apologized; which made her give me another of the odd looks I'd been getting all day. "Go on home, kid."

"As soon as I've cleared away. But you said something about something missing, Mr. J."

"Just wool-gathering, Ruby. But have *you* ever heard of a Vera Schell?"

"Sure. I've seen her at your house. And she answers the phone occasionally, when I call there. Your cook. That sort of plain-faced young woman."

"Horse-faced," I said, then hastily added, "but a heart of gold, a good worker...."

"What about her, then?" asked Ruby.

"Oh, nothing," I temporized. "I was just wondering if she might be capable of more responsibility. Maybe promote her to housekeeper."

Ruby studied her fingernails. "Are you asking me?"

I studied Ruby's half-averted face. "Should I ask you?"

"No. It's none of my business. But I'll say it anyway. I've known you and Mrs. J. for a good while and ... and I don't think your wife is wildly happy about being just a business-party hostess and an Englewood clubwoman and one of America's ten-best-dressed and ... and that kind of thing. I think, if you take even the management of her own household away from her ... well, what's left?"

"Good point, Ruby," I said, after a moment. "You're an astute young lady. I wish...." I stopped myself. I had been about to say that I fervently wished there might be a sure cure for Hodgkin's disease discovered before she died of it in 1983.

She went out the door. A minute later, it opened far enough for Les Hicks to stick his head in.

"Ruby's getting started on typing up the minutes of the meeting," he said, "and we're wondering —"

"Hell, I told her to go home and not waste any more of the holiday."

Les looked puzzled, but turned back to the outer office and told Ruby, "The boss says scram. Leave the typing for tomorrow." Then he came on into my office and shut the door behind him.

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"I was asking her how many copies you'd want run off. And do we do 'em up fancy in binders and all?"

"One for everybody who was present. And say an extra twenty for those who weren't. Whitney Baker. Any others over at Textron. And, yes, do them up presentation-style. Make them look as imposing as a Russo-American concordat."

I stood up and started to clap my desk calendar book shut. Then something on the page stopped me. This is one of those calendars that give printed notice of any noteworthy day: *Columbus Day, Mother's Day,* etc. But to day's page bore only the line: *Summer Begins.* It annoyed me.

"Wait a second before you go," I said to Les, as I riffled several of the big leaves backward and forward. *Flag Day* was in the right place: June 14, and *Labor Day:* first Monday in September, but *Independence Day* was printed on the page for July 4.

"You're our office manager, Les," I said. "Couldn't you buy desk calendars without misprints? The damned things cost enough."

"Misprints? Like what?"

"Look. This one celebrates today as the first day of summer."

"Well? It is, you know."

"Big deal. But look where this sloppy printer has put Independence Day. On the fourth of July."

"Er...what's wrong with that?"

"What's *wrong* with it? Why, it's just *wrong,* that's all."

I got my oddest look of the day, and Les began perceptibly to edge away from my desk.

Suddenly things began to click. Dinah's remark about my midsummer night's dream. All the people at work, not sunning on the beaches. No flags or Sales Day banners along the avenues. The blank faces when I'd opened the conference with a reference to Independence Day.

"Les," I said weakly, "would there be a perpetual calendar anywhere around here?"

"Uh...." He looked about the office. "Yeah, here's a World Almanac in your bookcase." He got it and began to search the index. "What am I looking for?"

"What day would have been my birthday? Day of the week, I mean. I was born on the twenty-fifth of August, 1948."

He gave me yet another apprehensive look, but finally said, "Uh ... that would have been a Wednesday, boss." He added, as if jollying a borderline lunatic: "Wednesday's child is full of woe, heh heh heh."

"Thanks," I said. I had been born on a Thursday. Thursday's child has far to go. I indicated the book lying before me. "Then I surmise this is a Gregorian calendar?"

"What the hell would you want on your desk? An astrolabe and a sundial?"

"But the Gregorian is the Roman Catholic calendar."

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"Well, the old-time Julian calendar was devised by a *pagan*. You got a Protestant calendar in mind to invent next?"

"It's just — it's just that I thought the Protestant countries never would adopt the Gregorian revision."

"It took them a while," he admitted. "But the Julian calendar was about eleven minutes wrong about the length of the year. So the Protestant and Catholic countries kept slipping further apart, timewise. England and her colonies didn't switch to the Gregorian until just before the Revolution, and by that date they had eleven days' difference to make up. In his own lifetime, George Washington had to change his own birthdate from February eleventh to February twenty-second."

"Eleven days," I said, and calculated in my head. "By now, we'd be thirteen days off." I looked at my calendar page of July 4, so absurdly designated *Independence Day*, then flipped back thirteen pages. June 21. Today. "But Flag Day ... and Labor Day ... they're in the right places. Oh, of course. They weren't even dreamed up until...."

"God amighty," said Les. "I've heard that Einstein flunked grade-school arithmetic, but I never believed it until now. Talk about absent-minded geniuses. Boss, do you really mean you've lived by the Julian calendar all your —?" He stopped and his face brightened. "That's it! Your secret of success! You've always been thirteen days ahead of your competitors."

And from now on, I thought woozily, I'd have thirty *years* jump on them. But all I said was, "Forget it, Les. I think my head's still full of concrete from that bout of flu."

I hardly noticed when he left my office. I sat down and stared at this calendar. Either it or I had long been marching to a different drummer. On the evidence, it was I. And the evidence answered the question I had been asking myself — and everybody else — ever since I awoke this morning. I have not been resuscitated by any future breakthrough of medical science. I have not been rejuvenated by any yet-uninvented mode of time travel.

I died — *died!* — just as every other human of humankind has died before me.

But I have come back. And not as a ghost, not in some other body, not as some other form of life. I have come back as myself, Greg Jeffries, but into another world — a world that is only minimally different from the one I lived and died in. Except for a trifling difference in marking time, everything and everyone here is exactly as I knew them in that other world (or time, or continuum, or whatever).

Of course, I must remind myself, I have been alive here for less than a day; I may yet find other differences. But I judge they'll be minor, if any. At the conference table today, after the

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business was concluded, we chatted of the news of the day. The Mideast tensions, and Jimmy Carter preachments, the Panama Canal treaties and the ERA amendment still unratified — all the same things that concerned my acquaintances back in "my" world's June of 1978. (Indeed, I had to bite my tongue once or twice, to keep from mentioning items like the gas-pipeline explosion that will practically obliterate Baton Rouge in 1979, the cataclysmic nuclear-plant accident that will evacuate the whole state of South Dakota in 1980, things like that.)

I died, but am no longer dead. Then am I only escaped alone to tell thee? The only one to tell, maybe, but not, I think, the only one to "escape." There is no reason why I should be the sole human in history thus to return from the dead. I believe all the billions who went before must have done the same. I think I am exceptional only in that some quirk of fate or some celestial oversight allowed me to *remember* my former life and death. At any rate, so far as I know, I am the first to speak out about it with the absolute authority of having been there and back. There must be many like me in this world — who knows how many? — and no doubt there were just as many in the world I died away from. Those others simply can't remember, or choose not to.

But if this is the Afterlife, why am I not at this moment a squawling newborn babe? The answer seems obvious. I came back at the one most significant, pivotal point in my life. I assume everyone else has been and will forever be similarly brought back. I wonder if all those others, given the second chance, manage to make the right turn at that pivot point in the (literal) next world. Me, I'm lucky. I remember. I need not guess or hesitate.

I gave my whole life to my work, at the expense of neglecting my beloved wife and denying her a life of her own. Both she and my partner opposed my reaching for still higher rungs on the ladder. When the merger brought Whit back from California, he and Dinah had that grievance in common — and soon found other things to share. I was left to make it all the way to the top — alone — and to die there, more miserably than any derelict failure. But Independence Day intervened.

I reached for the phone and dialed my home. "Dinah, please don't have Vera hold dinner for me. You go ahead. I'll be a little late getting back."

"Again," she said resignedly.

"There's something I want to write down — an account of the day — while it's still fresh in my memory."

"Yes. All right, Greg."

"You think I work too hard, don't you?"

"No. I know you do."

"I agree. I've decided to quit while I'm ahead."

She gave a small gasp. "Did the merger fall through?"

"Oh, no, all that business went —

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—smooth as a chess game, so far, but I'm going to call it off myself."

"What? *Why?*"

"Well, you don't want it, because I'm on the way to becoming Ebenezer Scrooge. Whit doesn't want it, because he's proud of what we've made of Jeffco, and he dislikes its being absorbed into a faceless conglomerate. So I've decided to sign Jeffco over to him and sign myself out."

"Greg!"

"What the hell, I've got the patents and the royalties. We'll still be better than well-off. And I may even dream up some new contraptions. But what I was dreaming about right now — do you remember that time we vacationed on Blackbeard's Island? We both loved it. I thought we might see if it's for sale."

"But what on earth would —? You dear imbecile, you'd wither in retirement."

"We can build. We won't hire an architect or a landscape designer. We'll even pension off Vera and Hawley and the maids and the gardener. We'll do it all ourselves, just you and me. We'll get a cruiser for voyages, and a sailboat for puttering around the island. There'll be horses, swimming, scuba-diving. A workshop for me to tinker in. If things get boring — well, what do they raise down there on those Carolina sea islands? Cotton? Blackbeard's bullion? We'll start a doubloon plantation. If all that begins to pall, well, we might discuss the long-postponed patter of little feet."

"Greg, I don't understand —" She broke off in apparent bafflement, but her voice had been vibrant to the verge of trembling.

"You'll understand when you read what I'm about to write."

And this is what I wrote.

It was as well after dark when I finished the foregoing and rang down for Hawley to bring the car around. Dinah excitedly began bombarding me with questions the moment I walked into the house, but I demanded that she first bring out the champagne. Then I gave her the bundle of handwritten pages to read and carried my own glass of Veuve Clicquot to the telephone, to call Doc Harbison. By some stroke of luck, I got him instead of his answering service.

"A relapse already?" he barked at me.

"No, just a question. Do you know of any research currently being done on Hodgkin's disease?"

"Jesus Christ, man, this morning it was schizophrenia!"

"I'm calling for a friend."

"That's what they all say. And then they start weeping."

"Be serious, Bert. I am. It's a matter of making a donation."

"Oh? Well, skip the American Cancer Society. Any donation would dwindle to a pittance, after they've taken their salaries and overhead. The

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Damon Runyon Fund is best; it doesn't take any rake-off at all."

"I don't mean cancer research in general, Bert. Do you know of any research center, or any budding Pasteur, concentrating specifically on Hodgkin's? It would mean a sizeable and continuing grant from Jeffco."

"No kidding? That's a damn fine gesture. And there's bound to be at least one deserving beneficiary. I can scout around and find out."

"Find out," I said and hung up and went to the bay-window seat where Dinah was just finishing the manuscript. She looked up from it with a wide, warm, loving smile.

"I particularly like that sentimental touch, where you forever fondle my perfumed note — which I never wrote and never would. And the touch of humor — marrying *Vera*." She laughed delightedly. "But, darling Ebenezer, you didn't have to go to all this trouble to justify your change of heart."

"You don't believe any of it?" I exclaimed, somewhat taken aback, though of course I should have expected it. "You know I don't have the imagination — let alone the patience — to concoct a complicated story like that. Anyway, it isn't just for you. I think it's important enough to be submitted for publication somewhere."

"Then I suggest you put a pen name on it, Greg. Otherwise you'll get no end of letters — the readers will even track you to our island — demanding proofs and assurances that *they'll* get a second go-round, too." She flicked a mischievous glance at me. "But right now you're forgetting doctor's orders. Bert said you should get right back to bed."

Much later, her smooth body stirred beside me, and she murmured drowsily, "But wouldn't it be absolutely world-shakingly magnificent if it all *was* true?"

If my own loving wife doesn't quite believe this story, I can't expect you to. But only the principal names have been changed. "It all *is* true," I whispered to her in the warm dark. "Sometime — a long time from now, I hope — it'll happen to you, and to me again. To both of us together, if the fates are kind."

And to you, too. You'll see.

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Letters

On Fantasy and Reality and Joanna Russ

Having written in to complain about Joanna Russ' review in the Feb. 79 issue, I would now like to tell you my reaction to her reply in the Nov. 79 issue.

Ms. Russ defends her position well, with lucid and close reasoning, and impressive scholarship. It is an impressive rebuttal. Ultimately, however, we come down to her assertion that the whole genre of fantasy is of little or no value because it is divorced from and irrelevant to reality. This I cannot agree with. But now I must ask you this, Ed. If you agree with Joanna Russ, shouldn't your publication be renamed "The Magazine of Science Fiction"? Why continue to publish escapist garbage? On the other hand, if you still value fantasy, why do you choose as your reviewer (actually one of your stable of reviewers) someone who dislikes fantasy?

I've seen this masochistic streak in F&SF before, as in (long ago) Alfred Bester's parting review, in which he told us in effect that we are all idiots for reading this crap in the first place. I honestly think that you do the genre a disservice by publishing these types of reviews.

I *do* have great respect for Joanna Russ as a writer, and I am interested in her opinions. Perhaps she could be prevailed upon to review only SF (a genre which she does not seem to reject in its totality), leaving fantasy reviews for others, such as the excellent Algis Budrys.

—David Palter
Hollywood, CA

Dear Mr. Ferman,

"Whither trending?" (I am sure Ms. Russ' self-vaunted "training, talent, and experience" will enable her to identify the quote, without too laborious a checking against her templates.) I refer, of course, to the transformation of a once-useful book review column into a forum for would-be lit crits whose sloppy scholarship alone more than disqualifies them for the job.

Unlike Russ, who disdains the work of backing her critical assertions with any nasty old hard fact, I'll support mine, with two instances:

1. Brian Aldiss' extended romp through the fields of American and English literature, some months ago, contained the amazing assertion that certain Old English poems ("The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer") were written in runes. When I wrote him a not-too-sincere request for a peep at these startling documents, he (metaphorically) wiped a tear from his eye with his grubby little fist, and informed me that letters like mine usually came anonymously, (yeah, Ms. Russ, we readers can be an irritable lot), but gave me permission to re-read my letter and repent my wicked ways. In the American high school in which I was educated,

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we used to call that a) poisoning the well and b) begging the question.

2. Ms. Russ' column in your February issue laments that no one informed Steven Utley and Howard Waldrop "... that 'arcing' and 'stomped' are not words." Guess she can't afford a dictionary on that pittance you pay her. Or maybe, just maybe, it's more fun to patronize the readers with *sics* and *per ses* (both misused in her November article, incidentally) than to look up a couple of words that don't smell right to her dainty nostrils.

I have no idea what Joanna Russ' qualifications as a critic are, although she makes a determined effort to have us confuse her with Shaw and Sartre. I need none of my own to decry the slippery sophistry of her November article, but my credentials are: A.B. in English, Cal State @ L.A.; M.A. in English, CSUN; C.Phil in English, with a specialization in Old English, UCLA. I know good criticism when I see it, and "That ain't it, kid, that ain't it."

If you, as an editor, need an esthetic standard to test your reviewers against, read Robert Kirsch's column in the *L.A. Times;* he covers all kinds of books, and he does it almost *every day*, without letting the taste of garbage send him into irrational rages against whole genres.

Speaking as a longtime subscriber — 20 years or so — regular, succint, thoughtful reviews are what I want, not snotty put-downs or sophomoric consciousness-raising sessions. If Ms. Russ really wants the Queen of Narnia as a role-model, she can have her — along with the Wicked Witch of the West, the Snow Queen, and Snow White's stepmother. Me, I'll take Galadriel.

—Elinor J. Lench
Sepulveda, California

Dear Mr. Ferman,

I enjoy Joanna Russ' *Books* columns, but I don't always agree with them. She says that many readers "wouldn't dream of challenging ... a dance critic's comments" but will challenge her comments. I can't see why silence should be such a good thing. If Russ comments, why can't she expect comments back? She certainly should puncture in the inflated reputations of "sf greats", but she should not expect or even hope for silence — which is apathetic.

Russ says that the "consensus of mainstream critical opinion" is that J.R.R. Tolkien is "a good, interesting, minor writer." I don't see why we must abide by the consensus of mainstream critical opinion, which only a decade or more ago thought Hemingway was a major writer and that science fiction was intrinsically trash. This consensus can be wrong.

This is not to say that I think Tolkien is a "great writer" — I really don't think those words mean anything. Tolkien certainly would be uncomfortable with them. But he certainly seems to have created one of the most powerful of the contemporary myths.

The thing that is most distressing is that Russ seems to feel that being a critic is very different from being a reader, and that is not true. We all become more critical as we become more experienced.

Cy Chauvin
Detroit, Mich.

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In her recent essay, Joanna Russ not only has misinterpreted the nature of the complaints voiced against her, she proves that she does not understand Fantasy, and that she places more reliance on her position as critic than she does on her logic.

The argument dealt with first in her essay, that of whether politics should be included in a review, is a case in point. The complaint was not the inclusion of politics, but the contortion of the subject in order to insert her own feminist politics in places where they were not relevant. In her own words, she applied standards that were "rigid ... and narrow" to fiction which did not meet her vision of the correct nature of relationships, whether personal or institutional. This is not legitimate criticism, no matter how it is twisted.

As to her view of Fantasy, she states that the genre is characterized by a "nostalgic wistfullness." She is obviously not referring to books such as *Watch the North Wind Rise*, by Robert Graves, or *Kingdoms of Elfin* by Sylvia Townsend Warner, or LeGuin's Earthsea Trilogy. She has another dodge ready, however: such works don't really count as Fantasy. It was in this manner that she exempted the works of Vance and Dunsany from consideration in defense of the genre. Any Science Fiction fan knows this argument: "It's not science fiction, it's too well written." this argument is generally heard by someone who has just offered *1984* or something by Wells as an example of what the field can produce. To hear it from a Science Fiction author is, to say the least, disturbing, and as unfair as it ever was.

When pinned down on these and other points, Russ retreats behind two more barricades: there is no proof for some of her statements, due to their very nature, and, anyway, some opinions (read hers) are worth more than others. While the first part of such a defense is possibly true, I see no reason to accept the second at her valuation. Suppose I decide that Tolkien's opinions, being those of an Oxford scholar, are worth more than Russ's? It becomes an endless circle; what should count is the logic behind those opinions, and here, as I believe I have shown to some extent, Russ does not score well.

Russ's statement that Tolkien does not belong in the company of people of whom we speak as "great writers," such as Dickens and Shakespeare, is also possibly true. But literary reputations are not fixed, as is proved in the revaluation of Brownings work, considered minor during his lifetime, or even the Victorian editing and censoring of Shakespeare's work, which was considered crude. Also, as can be heard in almost any English Literature class, a clever student can demolish any reputation with a few well chosen phrases. What can a prejudiced critic then be expected to do?

Let's close with her comments on reality, which, we are told, is all there is. Who's reality, one might ask. In Russ's reality, feminism is a burning issue. In my reality, feminism is just one of a number of rights movements claiming my attention, and a relatively minor one, compared to the troubles in the Middle East or Ireland. Thus, our realities overlap, but do not coincide.

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And are we to dismiss all art that uses a non-realistic mode of expression, or accept this choice as a comment on reality? Are we to demand that all art be masterpieces of realism, abandoning the work of Joyce, Beckett, Chagall? I think not. And why make these demands of Fantasy, when the same restrictions are not placed on Science Fiction or mainstream writing?

It is no easier to tell someone that they are bad at something they love than it is for them to hear it, but Russ is a bad critic, and her essay has done more harm to her cause than good.

James P. Hanrahan
Stamford, Ct.

Courageous extrapolation

I just received my December issue. Now that I am an unemployed student, I had considered letting my subscription expire until such time arrives when I am again employed. The December issue has convinced me I can't do without my favorite periodical.

Over the years my sole complaint about F&SF has been a paucity of material relating to women's humanitarian issues. (In fact, a few stories have been downright offensive — particularly the 'Papa Schimmelhorn' stories.) I despaired over the wasted opportunities for social extrapolation.

I'd like to thank you for having the courage to stick your neck out. There is a desperate need to shake up and wake up the men around us. Perhaps your readers (mostly male, I imagine) can see a little more clearly that the oppression of women is the oppression of everyone.

Your December issue was one of the best you've ever published. It was the first F&SF issue I've read several times in a row. Please don't stop there. Let's have more stories like December's.

Peggy Gibbons
Baltimore, Md.

—

Odious tripe

For many years now I have enjoyed your magazine. The experience has been somewhat like a banquet, each story a different course to be savored, some familiar, some strange, all to some degree enjoyable. Imagine, then, my dismay at uncovering the odious piece of tripe titled "Wives" in your December issue.

In my opinion, this is undoubtedly the worst story your magazine has published in the 18 or so years that I have been familiar with it. Ms. Tuttle's story combines vicious excesses of the worst of the feminist writers with the sort of self-pity not seen since the days of "Shuman The Human" in *Zap Comix*. Her "extrapolation of a certain domestic situation" (your description) becomes an excuse for a blanket condemnation of males in general and an exaltation of the joys of gay sex.

I have always had a pretty much live and let live philosophy, but I do resent being told that my gender automatically condemns me to the status of insensitive scum slavemaster. Try focusing on something other than the genitals, Ms. Tuttle, cause there are some real people back there, people who love, and fear, and care, people who are doing their best to deal with each other. It's too bad that stories

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such as yours make it all the more difficult to do so.

Bob Lauderdale
Kansas City, Mo.

Why Vampires Can't Reflect

In your December issue, In Baird Searles' FILMS, Mr. Searles takes exception to a vampire's being *reflected in a pool of water!* (Italics his.)

Now, there is no logical reason why a vampire can not reflect in *a pool of water!* (Italics mine.)

A mirror will not reflect a vampire — why? Well, it goes like this: Silver was paid to Judas for the betrayal of Christ. To compensate the spirit of the metal for the evil use it had suffered, it was given the special power to repel evil. Therefore, when an evil vampire stands before a *silvered* mirror, the metal repels the evil and refuses to afford the creature a reflection.

There you have the whole thing in a nutshell. A vampire could even be viewed with the aluminized reflecting surface of a telescope mirror, but not with one coated with silver.

The above stands also as the reason why a silver bullet is used to kill werewolves and other such were-creatures — again the power of silver to put down evil.

With best regards, keep up the good work,

—Manly Banister
Portland, Or.

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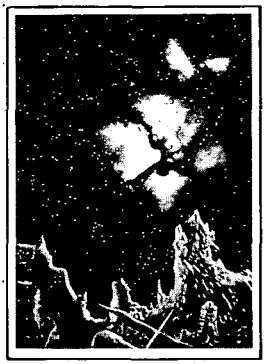

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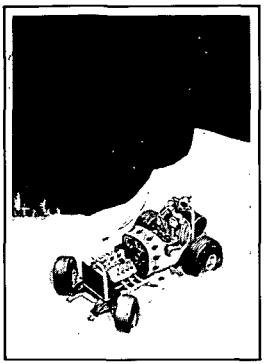

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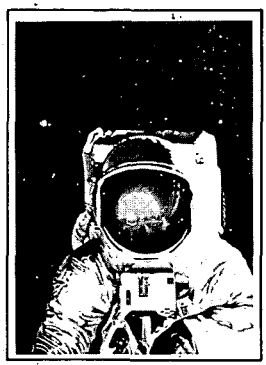

D

Full-color posters of four exceptional F&SF covers

These are not press proofs; they are a special small run of prints on quality, heavy stock. The quality of color reproduction exceeds that of the original printed covers. There is no overprinting, and they are suitable for framing (size: 9 x 11½).

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A - September 1968, Chesley Bonestell, "The Trifid Nebula."
B - January 1970, Mel Hunter, "Robot and dune buggy."
C - September 1970, Mel Hunter, "Robot at street crossing."
D - May 1971, Ron Walotsky, for "The Bear With the Knot On His Tail."

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